International Middle School Students' Experiences and Views on their Evaluation of Teachers

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Abstract

The evaluation of teachers by students is a common practice in many educational institutes around the world, and it is a burgeoning area of research. Despite the fact that there is a good deal of research that explores institutional and teachers' perspectives on student-teacher evaluations, there are few studies that seek the perspectives of students. Consequently, this study focuses on middle school students' views on their evaluations of teachers within an international school environment. This school is based in the Netherlands and provides an international education for expatriate children through the International Baccalaureate. The students involved in this study were in year 1 of the Middle Years Programme and were all 11-12 years old. The students were invited to respond to semi-structured interview questions, which explored how they felt about providing teacher evaluations, the factors they considered important when evaluating their teachers, and whether they believed that the evaluations improved their learning. They were also asked to identify what good teaching and poor teaching looked like to them. Prior to taking part in the interviews students were given an opportunity to think about the questions first, to avoid automatic responses, as opposed to reflective responses. The findings indicate that students have a range of perspectives in relation to student-teacher evaluations, with the majority feeling uncomfortable when asked to evaluate their teachers, whilst simultaneously believing that evaluations play a positive role in improving learning. In addition, students highlighted the importance of self-regulation skills, on the part of teachers, as well as teachers' capacity to be organized, inclusive, and kind. Overall, students emphasized the relational aspects of teaching, and they believed that evaluations helped them, as students, to be more observant and reflective of teaching and learning. Students made no reference to race and gender even though these themes have arisen in research literature associated with student evaluations. Given the international and multicultural nature of this environment, these themes would merit exploration through follow-up studies.

1. Introduction

The evaluation of teachers by students is a disputed issue worldwide, and despite the fact that there is a good deal of research that explores the perspectives of institutions and teachers in relation to evaluations, there are few studies that explore the viewpoints of students [1].

Consequently, this study focuses on the perspectives of students within a middle school environment, where students are asked to evaluate their teachers on a regular basis. The evaluation instruments that are used by the school, were originally designed for state system purposes, as opposed to the specific needs of an international school environment. In addition, neither students nor teachers are involved in conversations surrounding the purpose, administration, or outcomes of the evaluations.

As a result, concerns abound, within this middle-school context, with regards to the perceived efficacy and usefulness of the evaluation processes, given that the surveys used in the evaluations have not been purposefully designed with the student body in mind. In an informal study that preceded this study, teachers in this context highlighted their concerns regarding the validity and reliability of the students' responses. They also had reservations about students' capacity to provide mature responses, and they wondered if additional language learners could complete the evaluations without support. Teachers also indicated a perceived disconnect between the outcomes and the formal teacher evaluations. The points raised by the teachers as well as their eagerness to discuss the student evaluations led to an exploration of the students' perspectives.

Students appreciated the opportunity to participate in this follow-up study, and they had interesting insights to add to the conversation. Overall, they indicated varied levels of comfort with the evaluation process, they had a variety of opinions on the usefulness of the evaluations, they demonstrated thoughtfulness through the responses they provided, and they gave clear indications on the teaching practices and behaviors that they considered as either effective or ineffective to their learning.

Overall, the findings demonstrate the importance of including students' perspectives regarding student evaluations of teachers, as they provided insight on aspects of teaching and learning that were not highlighted in the evaluation instruments.

The following article describes the context of the study, it highlights some of the key points raised through literature, it identifies and discusses the themes that emerged through the interviews with the students, and then contemplates the implications of these findings for further inquiry, or for the further development of the student evaluations.

2. Context of the Study

The context of this study is a mid-sized International Baccalaureate international school environment based in the Netherlands, and the specific section of the school is Year 1 of the Middle Years Program (MYP). The students are all 11-12 years old, they are internationally mobile, and they stem from a variety of cultures from across Europe, Asia, the Middle East, and North America.

The program, that they are following, is one of four IB programs, and it promotes a constructively-oriented approach to teaching and learning, which incorporates disciplinary, interdisciplinary, and transdisciplinary understanding. In addition, all learning is underpinned by the global contexts, which emphasize identities, relationships, cultural expression, innovation, globalization, fairness, and sustainability.

In addition, teachers and learners are expected to adopt the attributes of the IB learner profile which guides character development, and which emphasizes the attributes of reflection, communication, knowledge, open-mindedness, thinking, balance, and risk-taking. Students also participate in community and service, and they learn how to apply a range of approaches-to-learning skills, including concept and process-based inquiry, research skills, critical thinking, digital citizenship, and social and emotional skills.

Correspondingly, teachers are expected to develop a range of approaches-to-teaching skills, behaviors, and attitudes which are outlined in the MYP Principles-into-Practice guide [2]. In short, there is an expectation that teachers will teach constructively, and that they design dynamic globally-oriented curricula that are responsive to the needs of their students, in line with the overall ethos of the IB.

Teachers who teach within the MYP typically come from different backgrounds, cultures, and countries, and may or may not have developed the knowledge and skills required to teach in an MYP environment during their initial teacher training. For this reason, their beliefs and practices may differ from some of the beliefs and practices that are most

desirable in this context, especially when it comes to constructivist-based teaching approaches.

For this reason, student evaluations could potentially serve a valuable purpose, if designed to reflect the specific nature of the teaching and learning context. As it stands, students evaluate their teachers using a generic digital survey at the end of each semester. This instrument is divided into sections and students rate their teachers in relation to their capacity to be organized, to provide interesting lessons, to invite student participation, to provide valuable feedback, and to demonstrate care and concern for student welfare. The instruments do not refer specifically to the approaches-to-teaching laid down in the MYP Principles-into-Practice guide [2]. Although it is not the primary goal of the project to compare student responses with MYP directives, it will be interesting, nonetheless, to notice whether students' perspectives reflect aspects of the approaches-to-teaching favored by the MYP.

3. Literature Review

The practice of students providing evaluations of their teachers teaching (SETs) has been around for a few decades. Student evaluations emerged, initially, in the 1920s in the US at university level, and these evaluations were intended to improve the practice of university-based educators [3]. The initial instruments used to collect students' views were surveys that asked students to rate the effectiveness of their teachers' teaching and the quality of their courses [4].

Survey questions referred to the personal characteristics of the teacher, including levels of enthusiasm, fairness, and helpfulness, and course particulars, such as content, organization, and clarity. These rating forms have not changed substantially, over the years and their use has spread to most university-based settings around the world [5]. Their use in secondary and primary school settings has increased with the advent of easy-to-administer digital surveys.

Students are generally considered to be in a good position to offer useful feedback on the quality of instruction [6], although concerns have been raised in relation to issues of validity and reliability [7]. One of the key concerns is the degree to which these evaluations have been associated with grade inflation [8]. Teachers may give higher grades out of fear that students will rate them poorly as teachers [9].

Additionally, cultural differences impact the value of student evaluations as the practice is received differently across cultures. For example, a study carried out in Japan indicates cultural resistance to the idea that evaluation can lead to improved teaching and learning [10]. In Western contexts cultural bias has also been flagged as a concern, with an examination of the ratings of teachers in the US indicating that non-white teachers typically receive lower student ratings

than white teachers [11]. This is an important point in an international school context, where there are a variety of teachers stemming from different cultural backgrounds, and where the students themselves are multicultural in origin.

Furthermore, student ratings may also be influenced by instructors' personalities rather than their teaching prowess [12], with teachers receiving high ratings due more to their popularity, than to their effectiveness as teachers [13]. This is particularly the case with younger students, and given that the students in this study were 11-12 years old, one can wonder as to the degree to which their perceptions are influenced by personalities.

Another issue that has been raised is the point that SETs are biased towards female instructors to a degree that should not be ignored given that the disparity is statistically significant [14]. This adds another layer of complexity to the evaluation of teachers by students.

A suggestion put forward as to why cultural and gender bias has become such an issue with student evaluations, has to do with the way in which the evaluation data is gathered. It appears that "the human mind functions along two very different tracks, one that generates automatic, instinctive reactions and another that produces more reflective, deliberative decisions" (p. 239-240) [11]. Consequently, one could argue, that, in the interest of fairness, student evaluations need to rely more on reflective input from students rather than automatic responses, of the kind that are indicative of most survey questions. Indeed, it appears that evaluations are considered more meaningful to teachers when written comments are included [15].

Interestingly, despite the fact that there are ample studies that explore teachers' perspectives on evaluations, there are strikingly few studies that explore students' perspectives. This occurs despite the fact that a research study across Canada and the UK indicates a 35 percent difference between students' expectations of teaching and learning and their actual experiences [16]. Studies that do exist indicate positive perceptions of evaluations by students when they believe that their evaluations are acted upon by their teachers and by their institutions [17], and when they believe that the majority of their teachers pay attention to the evaluations and modify their teaching accordingly [18]. This is an important point, as the degree to which students believe their feedback is valued directly impacts the quality of the feedback provided by students [19].

Conversely, students' concerns regarding evaluations hinge around whether they are taken seriously [20], whether they understand the purpose of the evaluations [21] and whether they have the ability to provide useful feedback [19]. They also have concerns about anonymity, how the data is being used [22].

To mitigate these concerns, there is a move towards the increased involvement of students in the evaluation process, and this is in evidence in a study in New Zealand where university students were involved in the design of the instruments used in the appraisal of their lecturers [23].

In addition, there is increased awareness of the interests and perceptions of students of different ages, and the role that these play in how they approach evaluations. For example, in a study with younger students, researchers have found that students of different ages focus on different aspects of teaching and learning when filling out evaluations [24]. Younger students, for example, pay more attention to the quality of the teacher-student relationships, whereas older students are generally more concerned with the content of what they are learning. This is an important point, given the age of the students involved in this study.

Overall, as can be seen from the literature, student evaluations have sparked a significant amount interest in academic circles, for a variety of reasons, and it is understandable that the exploration of their use has expanded to take the perspectives of students into account.

3. Data Collection

The study uses a qualitative methodology to gain insight into students' understanding of the use of student evaluations, how they feel about responding to them, what they considered to be important when filling them out, and whether they believe the evaluations improve student learning.

The purpose behind using a qualitative approach was to gather descriptive perceptions and explanations from the nine Year 1 students (S1-S9) through semi-structured interviews. The responses were generated in a constructive fashion, so as to capture the essence of the students' views.

Purposive sampling was used in the selection of the students, so as to gather a variety of perspectives from across this grade level group. Attention was given to selecting students of different genders, and from a range of cultural groups.

Prior to participating in the interviews, students had some reflective time to respond to the questions in written form first, in line with research that highlights the value of students having time to reflect on their opinions before responding [15].

Students responded to the following questions:
1. How do you feel about evaluating teachers?
2. What are the factors that you consider when you complete the teacher evaluation?
3. Do you feel that the teacher evaluations improve your learning?
4. What makes a good/effective teacher?
5. What makes a poor/ineffective teacher?

Subsequent to the carrying out of the interviews, the transcripts were coded, categories were generated, and these were then assembled into themes. The resulting themes and categories are indicated in the following sections, they are illuminated by quotes from the individual students, and discussed in light of the research literature that surrounds the evaluation of teachers by students.

4. Findings and Discussion

The themes arising from the data are itemized and expanded upon below in sections that reflect the guiding questions.

4.1. Feelings about the evaluations

Students' responses to how they felt about providing evaluations fell into either of two camps, one indicating a level of discomfort and the level of comfort.

Discomfort: strange, telling on teachers, afraid of consequences, concerns about anonymity
Comfort: leads to changes, teachers respect ideas, improves teaching, teacher development

The students who felt uncomfortable believed that it was strange to be asked to evaluate teachers, when it was usually the teachers who evaluated them. In addition, there was a feeling of not being comfortable sharing information without the teacher knowing. For example, S4 said "I don't feel good about saying things behind people's back". Concerns about anonymity were also in evidence with S5 sharing that they were "afraid the teacher may recognize my hand-writing", and S7 said they were comfortable with evaluations "as long as no one can see what I did". Worry about the unknown consequences of the evaluations, and whether there was true anonymity has come up in a number of studies with older students as well [22] and one can only wonder as to how this anxiety impacts what students feel comfortable sharing.

For the students who were positive about the evaluations, there was a sense that they were contributing to teacher development. For example, S9 said, "I don't really have a problem with doing it because it helps improving the teachers", and S2 says that evaluations "can makes changes, and these are usually good changes". In addition, S2 felt that "a teacher would usually respect your ideas".

For both those who were comfortable and uncomfortable, there was an appreciation of the role that evaluations play in teachers making changes to their teaching. For example, S4 says "it is a little uncomfortable but it feels good knowing they will consider our thoughts and try to get better", and S5 says "sometimes I feel uncomfortable, but I

understand why we need to do it". Their thoughts reflect those of older students who tend to believe that the information they provide enables teachers to improve their performance [19].

Overall, the students' responses demonstrated that they had clear feelings about the evaluations. Responses lacked ambiguity, and there was a general sense that the evaluations served a purpose, even if this purpose had not been fully explained, and even if there was a degree of discomfort surrounding their ultimate use.

4.2. Factors considered when completing evaluations

Students' views on the factors they considered important when filling out the evaluations generated the following themes and sub themes:

Teachers' actions: organization, preparation, activities, homework
Teachers' reactions: supportive, helpful, reactions when emotional, personal development
Student learning: quality of learning experience, understanding of activities, clarity

With regards to teachers' actions, S1 considered whether their teachers were "organized and prepared, S3 focused on "how much homework they give", and S9 considered "what the teacher does in the lessons and what we learn during activities". In relation to student learning, a number of students referred to the impact of teachers on their capacity to learn and understand the lesson material. For example, S6 mentioned, "I think about whether I can understand what I am learning". This comment is not surprising, given that the MYP focusses heavily on teaching-for-understanding, as opposed to teaching for recall. Students appreciate that they are expected to understand the material in order to learn effectively, as was clear in S6's response.

The strongest theme, however, was students' impressions on how the teachers behaved during the lessons, whether they treated the students well, and whether they were able to manage themselves when they were stressed or when things did not go well. For example, S3 shared that they "consider how the teachers react to different situations", and S2 considers "what they do when they are angry, tired, or if something goes wrong", and S4 said that they "think about if they are actually treating us right".

Students' emphasis on the relational aspects of teaching and learning is not surprising researchers have found that younger students place more of an emphasis on how teachers behave towards them than on the content of what is being taught [24]. Although, in saying that, I did not find that the students' comments ignored or minimized teaching and learning, they simply did not emphasize these aspects

as strongly as their teachers' capacities to be supportive, kind, and well regulated.

The approaches-to-learning and the approaches-to-teaching dimensions of the MYP [2] place a strong emphasis on affective skills, including the capacity of both students and teachers to self-regulate by managing their thoughts, emotions, and behaviors. It is possible that an awareness of the importance of these skills for teaching and learning influenced the responses that the students provided in this section.

4.3. Impact of evaluations on student learning

Students' responses to the perceived impact of the evaluations on student learning yielded the following themes:

Learn from mistakes:
skills development, clarity, improve learning
Think about teaching and teachers:
 novel observations, understanding, reflection

Students' views centered mostly on the ways in which their evaluations were an opportunity for teachers to learn. In relation to teaching and learning, S5 said, "Well I think that if they (the evaluations) tell teachers they can improve their skills and that affects your learning", and S6 shared, "the teacher could learn from mistakes and make an activity more understandable", and S8 says, "the teacher would know what to do to make learning better for students". In addition, S9 says, "if the students are doing something wrong and they see it they can correct their mistakes in teaching".

Students, generally felt confident that their evaluations would be followed up on by the teachers. This expectation may, in turn, impact the quality of their evaluations, given that there a relationship has been found between the quality of students' evaluations and the degree to which they feel that these evaluations are valued and will be acted upon [17].

With regards to evaluations being an opportunity for students to learn, comments by some students indicated that filling out the evaluations enabled them to be more observant and reflective of teaching and learning between evaluation periods. For example, S3 shared, "it helps me to think and reflect about my opinion, even if I didn't notice it before", and S4 says "we could notice some things about the teacher we never knew before". S7, in addition, mentioned that "it makes you learn what you feel about your teacher".

The point about reflection is interesting, especially in an environment where reflection is at the core of what students do on a daily basis. For example, each assignment is followed by a reflection, and reflective thinking tools are used several times a day during classroom activities. It is clear that some of the students are extending this reflective capacity to the evaluation of their teachers in the months in-between the formal evaluations. Indeed, the evaluations appear to be encouraging a deeper level of awareness with regards to the teaching style of their teachers, and how they feel during their classes.

4.4. Students' beliefs on what makes a good/ effective teacher

Students' perceptions on what makes a good/effective teacher generated the following themes:

Balanced: not too easy, not too nice, bit strict but not too strict, fun but not too much fun
Approaches to teaching:
knowledgeable, organization, clarity, teaches for understanding, reflective, active, inclusive, checks understanding, questions, uses time well, listens
Affective support: caring, kind, pays attention, loving, thoughtful, thinks about students

The main theme centered on the need for teachers to be balanced in their overall approach, and students were clear that they thought good teachers navigate a balance between being nice but not too nice. For example, S9 feels that a good teacher is "not too nice but not too mean so you learn good" and S1 believes that a teacher should not be "too much of a softy because otherwise you might not learn anything", and S7 thinks a good teacher "isn't someone that lets you do whatever you want".

What stands out here is the continued reference to balance in relation to aspects of teaching and behavior. Interestingly, one of the key IB Learner Profile attributes is the need to be balanced in one's approach to life, and particularly when it comes to actions, thoughts, and behaviors. I wonder whether the continuous focus on this attribute plays into students' perceptions of what good teaching is.

Although students did not directly refer to different personality types specifically, it appears that teachers' personalities may inform their evaluations, with more moderate personality types being favored [12]. However, I did not get the impression that the students' preferences stretched to the point of favoring popularity over effectiveness as has been found to be the case in research with university students [13].

In relation to approaches to teaching there was a general consensus that good teachers have a broad range of knowledge and skills, they teach for understanding, and they include all students in the learning process. Overall, students identified each of the broad categories generally included in student evaluations [5]. For example, S7 says that "an effective teacher teaches you a lot". S2 says that a good teacher "helps the students overcome their difficulties, listens to the students, makes the lessons

fun, explains well, and asks questions". S6 says that a good teacher thinks about the class and how they learn and tries to make the learning easier".

The affective nature of the teacher came through strongly again in the responses to this question, with almost all students commenting on the need for teachers to be kind and caring and able to self-regulate when things don't go as planned. S2 says that a good teacher "doesn't get upset if you don't understand what or how to do something", and S4 thinks that "a good effective teacher will be kind to the students and show that they love them". Again, it was clear that the majority of the students believe that how the teacher is, is as important as what they teach and how they teach it, reinforcing the point about younger students, and the degree to which they emphasize the relational aspects of teaching when evaluating teachers [24].

Interestingly, students did not comment noticeably on the cultural aspects of evaluations that research indicates may lead to bias [11]. They did not refer, for example, to race, gender, and appearance as important considerations, although this does not mean that these factors do not impact the evaluations. Given that these points did not come up spontaneously, they may merit exploration through further studies, especially given the multicultural nature of the teaching environment, and the degree to which racial bias has proven to be an ongoing concern when it comes to the validity and reliability of student evaluations [11].

There is also the possibility that students chose not to comment on aspects of race, given that this is a complex and contested topic in international school environments, where one or two cultures usually dominate the teaching body, and upwards of fifty different nationalities may be present in the student body, as is the case in this school. Recent studies have brought to light the degree to which racism is prevalent in international school environments [25], although this had not translated, as yet, into open and transparent dialogue, which could empower students to speak openly on the topic.

4.5. Impressions on bad/ineffective teachers

The following themes emerged when students were asked to describe bad/ineffective teaching:

Lack of ability to self-regulate: cross, selfish, lack of care, unfairness, self-involved
Not balanced enough: too soft, too nice, too mean, too strict, not strict enough
Lacking in knowledge/skills: no explanation, tests, outdated approaches, lack of knowledge

As could possibly be predicted students' responses were, on average, the inverse of what had been shared in the previous section with students viewing ineffective teachers as teachers who were self-involved, lacking in knowledge and skills, and not consistent and balanced in their approaches to classroom management. For example, S2 says that an ineffective teacher "gets cross easily and never helps you and is very unfair", S3 says that such a teacher "doesn't show care, and doesn't enjoy the topic or the students". S6 indicates that "a bad teacher is a selfish teacher", and S8 suggests that an ineffective teacher "would be so caught up in himself/herself that classes cannot run smoothly".

Concerning classroom management, students were, once again, clear on their dislike of teachers who were too nice, as they felt that this hampered learning. S1 talked about "too much softness", S7 mentioned that an ineffective teacher "lets you do whatever you want", and S5 felt that teachers should not be "too nice". A lack of knowledge and skills also stood center stage, with S9 saying that an ineffective teacher "doesn't have any knowledge base", S5 says they are "disorganized", and S3 says that an ineffective teacher "doesn't include the students". Interestingly, S1 indicates that ineffective teachers are "stuck in the past and they just make you do test after test, and they never explain anything". This is an interesting comment, as the context of the study is an inquiry-based one, where students should not be receiving test-after-test, given that the practice of testing does not align with the philosophy of the IB MYP.

Overall, there is a sense that students have a good grasp as to what ineffective and effective teaching looks and feels like, which enables one to understand why educational contexts in New Zealand [23] involve students in the development of evaluation tools for teacher evaluation. Even though the students in this study are 11-12 years old, they have commented on many of the characteristics that one would one expect to observe in an experienced MYP teacher. The aspects of MYP teaching and learning that they commented on frequently included: teaching for understanding, the importance of reflection, inclusive approaches, balanced perspectives, learning from mistakes, building explanations, active questioning, incorporating contemporary inquiry-based methodologies (as opposed to tests) and the demonstration of care and concern for students.

Given the degree to which the students were able to comment freely (and without prior preparation) on key aspects of MYP teaching, it strikes me as unusual that they are not more involved in discussions surrounding the teacher evaluation process.

5. Conclusions

The study has demonstrated that students have a variety of perspectives when it comes to the use and the value of student evaluations. Overall, even though they do not all feel comfortable filling out the evaluations, they feel that their feedback will be

received well by the teachers, and that teachers, on the whole, will pay attention to their advice.

Contrary to research findings with older students, the middle schoolers, placed significant emphasis on the relational aspects of teaching, and commented frequently on the need for teachers to be kind and supportive, as well as balanced in their teaching approaches and temperament. This indicates the importance of relationships at this age level.

Students, in general, believed that the opportunity to fill out the evaluations caused them to reflect more on their learning, their teachers' approach to teaching, and how they felt during their classes. Indeed, students found themselves reflecting on teaching, in the time periods between the semester evaluations.

The lack of reference to race and gender is interesting, and merits further exploration, especially given that this is a rising area of concern in relation to teacher evaluations, and also in relation to race-based experiences within international school environments.

6. Implications

This study was carried out with one grade level of students, and although it proved valuable, there is obvious merit in extending the study to a broader range of students, to include the students from age 13-18. It is conceivable that older students' perspectives may differ from the younger students' perspectives, given that research already indicates that older students pay more attention to the content of courses and to the knowledge base of the teacher than to the relational aspects. It would be interesting to explore whether this is, indeed, the case with students at the higher levels of the MYP and at the Diploma Program level (17-18 years old).

Also, the fact that students did not spontaneously raise issues pertaining to race and gender indicates that there may be a need to address these questions directly, albeit in such a way that does not make students feel unduly uncomfortable, as this could, in turn, compromise their responses. The fact that racial bias exists in relation to student evaluations at university level suggests the need to explore the issue more in depth with middle and high school students.

Another important exploration would be to share the students' perspectives with the faculty, to get their feedback on the patterns that they notice in the data, and how this relates to their own perceptions on students' capacity to complete the student evaluations. In the study that explored teachers' perspectives, teachers commented on the degree to which lack of maturity could influence students' evaluations, but, as this study demonstrates, students demonstrated a good degree of understanding of MYP teaching practices.

A combination of the students and teachers' perspectives could serve to initiate broader and deeper levels of discussion surrounding the evaluation process, which, if moderated effectively, could serve to inform strategic decision-making processes at administrative level.

7. Limitations

The major limitation of this study is that only nine students were interviewed. This is a relatively small sample size, and, therefore, limits the degree to which one can generalize the findings to the wider community. In addition, given that I was known to the students, it is important to acknowledge that this may have influenced their responses in some way.

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