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Teacher Enthusiasm and Student Learning

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Introduction

When asking preservice teachers which characteristics comprise an effective teacher, “enthusiasm for teaching” comes up as the second most important factor, surpassed only by “being student-oriented” (Witcher & Onwuegbuzie, 2001). Preservice teachers describe enthusiasm as the possession of an unwavering love of the subject and of teaching and demonstrating commitment to the job. This view of the importance of enthusiasm is shared by many researchers, and consequently, enthusiasm is listed as a key determinant of effective teaching in major reviews of related research (e.g., Brophy & Good, 1986). In university settings, where student ratings are used for evaluation of instructors, enthusiasm is not only a common aspect of multifaceted teacher evaluation instruments (e.g., Marsh, 1994) but even more so a desirable and defining characteristic of good teachers.

Usually, teacher enthusiasm is considered to be a special mode of delivering information to students (cf. Kunter et al., 2008). A teacher is perceived as being enthusiastic when he or she succeeds in communicating excitement about the subject to students. Notions of enthusiasm can vary considerably: most of them consider only the “delivery” aspect and adopt a behavioral approach that relates enthusiasm mainly to a teacher’s expressiveness (such as gestures, vocal delivery, or facial expressions; e.g., Collins, 1978). Other notions define enthusiasm as a component of a teacher’s personal characteristics or even an aspect of professional competence and view expressive behaviors only as the manifestation of an underlying quality or characteristic of enthusiasm (Kunter et al., 2008; see also Frenzel, Goetz, Lüdtke, Pekrun, & Sutton, 2009 on the relation between teacher *enjoyment* and enthusiasm).

Teacher enthusiasm is considered to be an important component of classroom life, not merely because teachers,

researchers, and students all believe that it is, but more tangibly because it has the power to positively influence student outcomes (Brigham, Scruggs, & Mastropieri, 1992; Patrick, Hisley, & Kempler, 2000; Rosenshine, 1970).

Research Evidence

In Rosenshine’s (1970) review of research on teacher enthusiasm prior to 1970, it is clear that student achievement was the focus for the studies included. Two research designs were distinguished: high inference and low inference studies. In the high inference studies, the level of a teacher’s enthusiasm is determined via students’ perceptions or external observers; this is usually done on high-inferential indicators such as bipolar adjectives (e.g., dull vs. stimulating). Teachers deemed more enthusiastic were compared to less enthusiastic ones with regard to students’ achievement. Findings favored enthusiastic teachers: student achievement was higher for students of more enthusiastic teachers. Summarizing the low-inference studies, three types of behaviors corresponding to enthusiastic teaching could be identified: teachers’ expressiveness, praise, and the types of questions a teacher asked in class.

Researchers made important advances in identifying these low-inference behaviors by defining eight indicators for enthusiasm in reference to teachers’ expressiveness: varying the speed and tone of voice; maintaining eye contact with the group; using demonstrative gestures; movements of the body and in space; exhibiting a lively facial expression; choosing highly descriptive and illustrative words; being eager in accepting students’ ideas and feelings; and maintaining general vitality and drive throughout the lesson (Collins, 1978). The majority of the following studies used these enthusiasm indicators and employed them in experimental settings. Teachers were trained to perform high or

low on particular enthusiasm indicators and behaviors. After ascertaining the effectiveness of the training, students were assigned to either a trained and therefore enthusiastic teacher or alternatively to a teacher with no training. Again, with respect to achievement, results favored those students in the enthusiastic condition (e.g., Brigham et al., 1992). There have been studies, however, that fail to demonstrate the expected relation between teacher enthusiasm and student achievement, but this failure has been attributed to design-related and methodological issues rather than to the construct of enthusiasm itself (e.g., Bettencourt, Gillet, Gall, & Hull, 1983). Nevertheless, a general positive influence of teacher enthusiasm on students' achievement seems to be an established relation, even though research investigating this effect is rather old. This positive effect is also supported by ample evidence that enthusiastic teachers are perceived by students to be more effective (cf. Feldman, 2007). Further studies show that teacher enthusiasm positively influences not only students' achievement, but also their behavioral (e.g., on-task behavior, Brigham et al., 1992) and affective outcomes (e.g., intrinsic motivation, Patrick et al., 2000).

Although research has supported the conclusion that enthusiasm influences student outcomes, exactly how this dynamic works remains unclear; there is not yet any empirical evidence conveying such a mechanism. However, various ideas and explanations can be found throughout literature, essentially highlighting three possible mechanisms. One is that enthusiastic teacher behaviors increase student attention, which serves as a mediator between enthusiasm and student achievement. One possibility is that teaching in an enthusiastic way provides "stimulus characteristics likely to attract and hold the attention of students" (Bettencourt et al., 1983, p. 446). This explanation is especially likely when enthusiastic behaviors are defined mainly as expressive, nonverbal behaviors because the attention-commanding role of such behaviors is established (cf. Bettencourt et al., 1983). In a second possible mechanism (see also Frenzel et al., 2009), the teacher serves as a kind of role model for his or her students; thereby, students are able to adopt the teachers' attitudes (e.g., enjoyment and enthusiasm) for themselves and "therefore concentrate more, think about the topic more, associate more positive feelings toward the subject, and consequently achieve more" (Brigham et al., 1992, p. 73). A third suggestion is that students "catch" their teachers' emotions and consequently experience these emotions themselves (*emotional contagion*; cf. Hatfield, Cacioppo, & Rapson, 1994). When it comes to achievement, the influence of enthusiasm is possibly twofold: the nonverbal part of teacher enthusiasm has a positive effect on students' attention, whereas the enthusiastic teacher, serving as a role model in exhibiting enjoyment and engagement, has a positive effect on students' motivation and academic emotions. Therefore, student behaviors and states related both to attention and motivation might serve as conduits through which the influence of enthusiasm on achievement can be explained.

Concerning the causal relation between teacher enthusiasm and student achievement, experimental studies conducted to evaluate the effect of enthusiasm on students support the idea that the direction of causality is from enthusiasm to achievement. In this kind of study, indicators for enthusiasm are set in advance for teacher training. In parallel, observers rate the teachers' behavior on these indicators before and after the teacher training to ascertain its effectiveness. In an experimental control group design, the effect of teacher enthusiasm on students' outcomes is investigated. The majority of these studies report successful training of teachers' enthusiasm, with the experimental group outperforming the control group in terms of their respective students' outcomes (e.g., Bettencourt et al., 1983; Brigham et al., 1992; Patrick et al., 2000).

Correspondingly, the reverse effect of student achievement and motivation on teachers' enthusiasm seems intuitive: a teacher, who is confronted with highly interested, motivated high-achievers, would be presumably more enthusiastic than a teacher confronted with less interested, lower-achieving students (Stenlund, 1995). Other authors also suggest that students' behavior, achievement, and motivation may affect teachers' enthusiasm (e.g., Frenzel et al., 2009; Patrick et al., 2000). As with most human interactions, the effects are likely reciprocal.

Summary and Recommendations

The evidence presented in this chapter supports the importance of teacher enthusiasm when considering effective teaching and fostering meaningful learning. Regarding student achievement, however, the research results are rather old and new investigations are warranted. With respect to research on teacher enthusiasm in general, there are also limitations, especially related to how teacher enthusiasm is conceptualized. As mentioned before, the majority of the research considers enthusiasm as mainly expressive behavior whereas only one investigation explicitly conceptualizes it as a traitlike teacher characteristic (Kunter et al., 2008). Even though a relationship between the two notions is posited, it is not exactly supported empirically. Regarding conceptualization, one may inquire about the object of enthusiasm: what is a teacher enthusiastic *about* (cf. Kunter et al. 2008)? A behavioral notion, naturally, cannot provide insight into this question. Furthermore, the question of whether enthusiasm is something subject-specific also emerges: Can a teacher who teaches two subjects, for instance, be more enthusiastic about teaching one subject over the other? Does being enthusiastic about teaching have the same implications as being enthusiastic about the subject? Kunter et al. (2008) demonstrated that enthusiasm about teaching is a more powerful predictor when it comes to various teacher behaviors; in any case, more studies are needed investigating the relations between enthusiastic behaviors and a possible trait of enthusiasm.

In light of the research presented here, future studies

would need to consider an integrated model of teacher enthusiasm with a trait-like component as the "source." This component would need to be considered subject-specific and may also be tied to other teacher characteristics, such as subject matter knowledge or resilience (c.f. Kunter et al., 2008). Such personal traitlike enthusiasm manifests itself in nonverbal, expressive behaviors. Therefore, this manifestation and possible conditions for a successful transfer between traitlike and behavioral components need to be carefully investigated.

As presented at the beginning, expressive behaviors of teachers positively influence students, and trainings thereof have been successfully accomplished. As a possible practical application of these findings, teachers can be made aware and trained to be more expressive in order to engage their students. Teachers should understand that their positive attitude and feelings are transported to students (*emotional contagion*); a good and effective way of showing one's enthusiasm is being (nonverbally) expressive, perhaps excessively so, for example by using gestures to accentuate or illustrate some contents, exhibiting a lively facial expression, and avoiding being physically withdrawn (behind the desk or rigid posture). However, enthusiasm as expressive behavior is unlikely to hold student engagement over a long time if the students are otherwise not supported in their motivation and learning (cf. Patrick et al., 2000). Expressive behavior could, however, foster students' motivation and learning when first confronted with new subject matter, or could help bridge an otherwise dry topic (c.f. Frenzel et al., 2009). To identify possible long-term applications of enthusiasm in classroom practice, other ways enthusiasm manifests, in addition to expressiveness, need to be investigated. It seems plausible that enthusiasm could also be expressed through other engagement-, motivation- and contextualized teaching strategies. Once these potential means of expression are identified, they can be considered for the development of future teacher training.

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