Expertleerkrachten in de omgang met probleemgedrag
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Summary

In this dissertation, I focus on the following general research question: How do teachers define behavior problems, how do teachers handle behavior problems, and how do expert teachers differ from non-expert teachers in the definition and handling of behavior problems?

The research in this dissertation is interdisciplinary and touches upon the fields of special education, educational science, and psychology. I attempt to build a bridge between the knowledge of practitioners (i.e., teachers) and theoretical knowledge via the selection of a suitable research strategy, namely the use of both qualitative and quantitative and data driven and theory driven research methods.

Experts can provide us with both practical and theoretical information, which can provide insight into how behavior problems can and should be handled. However, the terms ‘behavior problems’ or ‘problem behavior’ are not unambiguous, which makes it difficult to clearly delimit the domain of the expert teacher. Both determination of who is an expert and what constitutes ‘adequate handling’ are thus complex.

In the first three chapters, I specify my position with respect to the different approaches, theories, definitions, and strategies. In the three chapters thereafter, I present the results of six empirical studies in which the general research question is divided into various sub questions. In Chapter 7, I look back upon these ambitions and reflect upon the research objectives.

Chapter 1 (Exposition)

In Chapter 1, I present and discuss a selection of excerpts of interviews with three educational practitioners, namely two teachers and one interim manager. I asked the teachers about behavior problems on the part of students and how they deal with these. The teachers thus describe situations that they experience as problematic and situations associated with feelings of shortcoming, failure, and incompetence. I asked the interim manager about the difference between good and poor teachers in terms of dealing with behavior problems. The results of the qualitative interviews expose ideas about the expert teacher: the core of this dissertation. In addition, I consider the subjective, relative, and relational aspects of behavior problems along with the ‘match’ or fit/misfit (attunement) between the educational needs of the student and the educational provision.
Chapter 2 (Societal relevance and theoretical framework)
In Chapter 2, I elucidate the societal relevance, definitions, choice of paradigm, and theoretical framework for the constructs ‘handling’ and ‘problem behavior’. Within the context of societal importance, I consider not only the objective of inclusive education but also the objective of enhancing the proficiency of teachers. In doing this, I attempt to bridge the gap between educational practice and theory. Knowledge that stems from and has also been shown to be of use in actual practice is obviously easier to implement than knowledge that draws upon scientific theory alone. Nevertheless, systematic comparison of practical knowledge with scientific theory can contribute to the eco-validity of interventions and thereby increase the probability of successful implementation of these interventions.

I next consider the diversity of opinions regarding the nature of the behavior problems and their definition. The phenomenon and terms used to describe it can be seen to reflect a number of perspectives. The pluriformity of problem behavior is also reflected in the different practical and theoretical definitions provided for it. In both practice and theory, the term ‘problem behavior’ is bounced around by various interests and orientations. Different political-economic interests and theoretical presuppositions thus underlie the terms adopted to describe behavior problems.

I next distinguish and describe three general theoretical approaches concerning behavior problems. In the child characteristics (or dispositional) approach, research and intervention are aimed at primarily modification of the behavior or characteristics of the student. In the school characteristics approach, research is aimed at primarily identification of what characterizes effective schools and effective education. In the interactional approach, which I myself adopt, the match (attunement) between the needs of the student and educational provision is of primary concern. I thus see behavior problems to reflect the interaction between teacher and student. Within this approach, moreover, problem behavior is viewed as subjective, relative, and relational.

In the adoption of an interactional approach to the handling of behavior problems by teachers, I further call upon a combination of three theories: conflict theory, interpersonal personality theory, and misfit theory. These three theories explicitly address the subjective, relational, and relative aspects of the domain of this research, namely the handling of problematic student behavior by expert versus non-expert teachers.
Chapter 3 (Strategically and methodological justification)

In this chapter, I raise the question of which research strategy is most suited to answer the general research question. I do this using the following guidelines. 1) It is attempted to bridge the gap between theory and practice. 2) The status of prior knowledge regarding behavior problems and how to deal with them is taken into consideration. 3) An interactional perspective is adopted. And 4) explicit criteria are considered to identify experts.

I distinguish the terms ‘strategy’ and ‘method’ within the context of the present research. I use the term ‘strategy’ to denote all of the specific methods adopted and the order in which these methods are applied (i.e., the ‘research strategy’). I use the term ‘method’ to refer to the specific research design per study.

I next outline my position with respect to a number of classical methodological contrasts. The emphasis shifts during the course of this dissertation from the conduct of qualitative research to the conduct of quantitative research and also from data driven to more theory driven research.

In Chapter 3, I also describe the so-called expert paradigm. This paradigm stipulates the methodological guidelines and requirements for adequate expert research. The requirements can be summarized in terms of two criteria: an external criterion and an internal criterion. The external criterion concerns the indirect indicators used to identify an expert. Those who are proficient within a given domain designate the expert. The internal criterion concerns identification of the expert via the conduct of standardized tasks within a clearly delimited domain. Excellent or poor task performance thus constitutes the so-called direct indicator for designation of the expert.

Chapter 4 (Colleagues’ criteria to indentify an expert teacher)

In two studies, I studied the social indicators (i.e., external criteria) used to identify someone as an expert teacher. I examined the features that support teachers consider when asked to indicate an expert teacher within the domain of dealing with problematic student behavior in particular.

In Study 1, I use the so-called ‘concept mapping’ procedure to ask three groups of support teachers about the activities of an expert teacher in dealing with different behavior problems. I asked the individual support teachers to sort the elicited statements concerning those activities using their own criteria and to then score each activity for its importance in the designation of an expert.
The data point to the concept of the 1) reflective teacher who is also capable of clearly communicating with: 2) the student; 3) the class; 4) parents, colleagues, and experts. Such communication is undertaken to gather information, obtain help, and mobilize forces for the handling of problematic student behavior.

On the basis of the foregoing classification of activities, I next constructed a Profile Questionnaire to distinguish more capable teachers from less capable teachers (also see Chapter 5) and distinguish experts from non-experts (also see Chapter 6).

In Study 2, for the most part, I pursue the recommendations made in Study 1. I pose the following research questions with regard to the Profile Questionnaire: Does the structure of the questionnaire correspond to the four domains of teacher activity identified via concept mapping, and which domains of teacher activity are considered most important by the support teachers?

Support teachers (N=170) are asked to sort 36 items in terms of their importance for dealing with behavior problems. The sorting is done with the aid of a template that is known as the Q-sort.

The results reveal four clusters: 1) direct contact with the problem student where the teacher adopts an attitude of waiting and observing; 2) direct contact with the problem student where the teacher is active in the provision of direction for the behavior of the student; 3) activities aimed at third parties such as parents/guardians and professionals undertaken by the teacher on the behalf of the problem student; and 4) reflection with regard to the teacher's own behavior in situations — either in the presence of others such as the remainder of the class, colleagues, parents, and experts or not.

Chapter 5 (Teachers' responses to scenarios with student behavior)

In this chapter, I study teacher judgments regarding the problematic behaviors of students. The subjective and relative aspects of behavior problems are central in this endeavor, and I pose two kinds of research questions: 1) What types of behavior on the part of students are perceived as problematic by teachers and thus exceed the capacities of the teachers? And what class, grade, school, and teacher characteristics — including teacher expertise — relate to teacher perceptions of problematic student behavior? 2) What types of behavior weigh heaviest for teachers in the evaluation of behavior as problematic and does this weighting relate to the expertise of the teacher?
To answer the first kind of question, I used primarily the so-called vignette design to analyze the reactions of teachers to scenarios that I present to them. In doing this, I examine the influences of student behavior, teacher skill, and both class and school characteristics on teacher feelings of incompetence. The results of the multilevel analyses provide insight into teacher evaluations of problematic student behavior. The multilevel analyses also allow a distinction to be made between the level of judgment and the judgment process. Both of these are part of the analytic judgment of the teacher and thus concern largely the first research question posed in this chapter.

In the analytic judgment of the teachers, seven out of the eight probed aspects of student behavior appear to influence feelings of teacher incompetence. Of the seven aspects of student behavior, lack of concentration exerts the greatest influence, followed by — in rank order — selfish behavior, unbalanced behavior, laziness, uninhibited behavior, bossy behavior, and unhewn behavior. The eighth aspect, namely stodgy behavior, shows a variable effect upon teacher feelings of incompetence.

In addition to the seven aforementioned aspects of student behavior, I found the number of courses that a teacher has followed to influence feelings of incompetence. The more courses the teacher has followed for dealing with students with special needs, the less student behavior is found to elicit feelings of incompetence. A similar association is found to hold, but to a lesser extent, for the number of years of regular elementary teaching experience. None of the context characteristics such as the size of the class or the number of students coming from a lower SES background influence feelings of incompetence on the part of the teachers.

I further found the teacher judgment process to differ for the unbalanced and stodgy student behavior. Neither teacher variables nor context variables can explain the observed difference, however.

The second kind of research question in this chapter concerns the relative importance of different aspects of student behavior for teacher perceptions of their behavior as problematic. I call this weighting the teacher’s holistic judgment and, to investigate this, each teacher is explicitly asked about the importance of various dimensions of student behavior for the judgment of the behavior as problematic. The teachers are given 100 units to distribute across eight dimensions of student behavior.
The descriptive data show the teachers to find the extent of concentration on the part of the student to be most important and the degree of student unhewnnes or complaisant behavior to be least important. I found no differences between the teachers who received high versus low evaluations for not only the analytic but also the holistic judgments provided by the sample of 61. I also find the results for the analytic and holistic judgments to largely converge: Teachers appear to pay attention to primarily the advancement of the learning process. I find those aspects of student behavior with a more social orientation to be of relatively less importance for the labeling of behavior as problematic and therefore to elicit relatively fewer feelings of incompetence on the part of teachers than other aspects of student behavior.

I have thus arrived at a new, conditional definition of problem behavior in which the condition is that teachers strive to improve the learning of as many students as possible. Under this condition, the extent to which teachers construe the behavior of a student as problematic depends — at least in part — upon the number of students for whom the objective of improved learning is impeded. In addition to this they take into account the amount of effort required to still achieve improved learning.

Chapter 6 (Expert teacher handling problem behavior)
In this chapter, I report on two studies aimed to gain insight into the relational aspects of behavior problems and examine the behavior of expert versus non-expert teachers in this regard. The general research question is bipartite. Does the degree of misfit between the provision of educational activities and the needs of students correlate with the extent of behavior problems? Is this association between educational provision and student needs less strong for those teachers who are experts as opposed to non-experts on student behavior problems?

The connection of the terms expert teachers, degree of misfit (attunement), and behavior problems makes the research in this chapter more theory driven than the research reported on in previous chapters. The notion of supply and demand are specified in the Self-determination theory by terms of the psychological needs of students and the educational provision. The following three basic needs are assumed for students: a need for competence, a need for relatedness, and a need for autonomy. The corresponding educational provision is defined as the supply of information, the supply of affection, and the supply of choices.
The association between the needs of the student and educational provision can be characterized according to the degree of fit or match (attunement). This implies that the educational provision may or may not meet the needs of the individual student. In the latter case, problem behavior can arise or worsen when it already exists. I adopt the following proposition as my theoretical starting point: An expert teacher adjusts his or her provision of education to the needs of the students such that behavior problems do not occur.

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In Study 1, I examine the mutual perceptions of teachers and students. Of particular concern is the adequacy of meeting the needs of the students such that experts are perceived by students as providing more adequate education than non-experts. A questionnaire is constructed and administered to 700 students who are asked to judge whether or not 36 teachers from grades 4, 5, and 6 meet the three basic needs of students. It is assumed that students can experience not only a shortage in this connection but also an excess. The teachers are similarly asked about their educational provision and their estimates of behavior problems on the part of students. The expertise of the teacher is determined on the basis of the number of years of teaching experience and number of extra courses followed.

I next conducted multilevel analyses. No support is found for hypothesis 1, namely that expert teachers do not judge their students as having fewer behavior problems than non-expert teachers. Partial support is found for hypothesis 2, namely that students who experience a shortage or excess in the meeting of at least one of their basic needs tend to be perceived by their teachers as having behavior problems. With respect to the need for autonomy, in particular, those students who would like more autonomy (i.e., less supervision/control) are more likely to be perceived as having behavior problems by their teachers than other students. Both students who experience a shortage in the meeting of their need for competence (i.e., would like to have more information) and those who experience an excess in the meeting of their need for competence (i.e., would like to have less information) are
also judged to be more problematic when compared to those who are satisfied with the meeting of their needs. These three effects, however, are found to be no less strong for the expert teachers than for the non-expert teachers, which is in contrast to what is assumed for hypothesis 3.

In Study 2, I examine the behavior of the teachers and students. In doing this, I again distinguish the basic needs of the students and the meeting of these needs by the teacher. Important constructs within this context are the task involvement of the student and the designation of certain teachers as experts by a third party. The key research questions are as follows: Are the students of expert teachers more well-behaved (i.e., more on-task, more attentive) than the students of non-expert teachers and do expert teachers appear to better meet the basic needs of students than non-expert teachers?

I roughly divide the relevant hypotheses — in keeping with interactional approach and the school characteristics approach — into ‘misfit’ hypotheses and ‘educational provision’ hypotheses. In the first case, the difference between expert versus non-expert teachers in meeting the needs of students is largely of concern. In the second case, the educational provision irrespective of the needs of students is of concern.

I next conduct observations on eight classes with four expert teachers, four non-expert teachers, and two types of students in each class. The two types of students are those designated as having behavior problems by a support teacher or the teacher and one or two randomly selected students. Data collection consists of simultaneous observation of the teacher and students. The behavior of the teacher and students is recorded using split screen video images. For the teacher, three types of educational provision are coded; for the students, three basic needs and the degree of task involvement are coded. The data produced by the time sampling procedure are primarily used to test the ‘educational’ provision hypotheses and to determine the task orientation of the students. The data produced by the event sampling are used to test the ‘misfit’ hypotheses.

For the ‘misfit’ hypotheses, I determined the most adequate behavior of the teacher by the event sampling. I operationalized ‘adequate’ in relation to the educational objective of growth towards self-determination. The data are analyzed per cluster, which involves one teacher and two types of students (i.e., those with behavior problems and those without). The results provide greater support for the ‘educational provision’ hypotheses than the ‘misfit’ hypotheses. The students with behavior problems are found to behave relatively better with an expert teacher than with a non-expert teacher. Expert
teachers are generally less controlling in the class than non-expert teachers. The educational provision approach or, in other words, school characteristics approach also appears to hold for the educational provision hypotheses regarding affection: The expert teachers are generally more friendly in the class than the non-expert teachers. For the provision of information (i.e., feedback), moreover, the expert teachers place greater emphasis upon good results than upon errors. This suggests a generally more positive class climate on the part of expert teachers rather than fine-grained attunement to the needs of students displaying problematic behavior. It is, of course, also possible that the expert teachers were really designated as such on the basis of their characteristics as a teacher in general and not on the basis of how they deal with problematic behavior in particular.

I thus reached two competing conclusions. The first conclusion is: If the expert teachers are designated by a third party as experts on the basis of general friendliness and authority, then the choice of the expert is not valid within a interactional approach. The second — competing — conclusion is: If the expert teachers have been designated as experts in a valid manner (i.e., experts with regard to the handling of problematic student behavior), then the expert teacher is more friendly, less controlling, and more authoritative than the non-expert teacher within a school characteristics approach.

Chapter 7

In Chapter 7, I look back upon my research findings in relation to the approaches and theories examined, the adopted research strategy, and the research questions posed. Given that little support is found for differences in the — according to theory — adequate handling of problematic student behavior by teachers designated as experts versus non-experts, I can conclude that the gap between theory and practice has not been narrowed. Research on the ‘reading’ of behavior in terms of the needs of students and on the ‘effects’ of teacher behavior on the behavior of students is still, thus, needed.
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