

Theses of Doctoral (PhD) Dissertation

**The Psychological Characteristics of Teachers
through the Eyes of their Students**

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Doctoral School of Humanities
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Debrecen, 2012

The objectives of the dissertation and the delimitation of the topic

Research projects examining teachers are mostly aimed at the efficiency of teachers, data related to teaching that can be measured or documented, as well as the teacher ideal formed on the basis of the opinions of students and other stakeholders in education. Several remarkable studies have also been written that examine improving interventions that could be implemented in the course of teacher training. Studies based on the opinions of students on their own teachers are relatively infrequent, despite the fact that experiences concerning actual persons provide a more stable and life-like basis of samples than those built on abstract ideas. Students are in a unique position as seeing their teachers without the disturbing influence of external observers. They live through the subjective experience of reality that determines the learning environment. Students alone can reliably judge how clear the material is to them, as well as how authentic and motivating they consider their teachers. Any external observer will necessarily disturb the system, and will only see an isolated class session.

It is difficult to have the subjective experiences of students accepted as a measure of values, even though these rational and emotional elements, experienced as a subjective reality, shape the internal conditions of learning. The influences of the teacher are exerted through the teacher-student relationship interface. In the course of my research project, therefore, my aim was to survey, with as little distortion as possible, the characteristics of teachers perceptible to students. I started out from a categorization of teachers' characteristics as formulated by the students themselves, and then strove to either confirm or refute the students' opinions with the help of statistically interpretable data, as well as the examination of teacher's profiles and tests.

I examined students' opinions obtained on the teacher-student relationship interface, the views of the teachers concerned expressed in interviews, as well as data gathered on teachers by way of tests and observations. In the course of the research my aim was to obtain a set of data generated using different approaches and methods in which the determining elements of the teacher's quality are exposed. My hope was that the results be suitable for use in teacher training. My expectations were reinforced by the positive experiences of the preliminary studies.

The methods applied and the process of the research project

My research plan and methods were conceived on the basis of the experiences of preliminary studies (Suplicz–Fűzi, 2007). In the course of these preliminary studies, the teachers' characteristics that can be obtained from undirected statements of student opinions – pedagogical virtues, values of the personality, emotional acceptance, humour and professional expertise, usually in this order of frequency – were clarified. On the basis of the examination of three age groups (secondary school students aged 16-18, college students aged 19-23, and teachers of engineering graduated within the past five years, aged 23-28) it could be ascertained that the five characteristics appear in all of these groups and with stable proportions, independent of age. The only perceptible difference was the higher value placed on expertise by older age groups, but even so it was not in the three most important characteristics.

The examination of teachers considered by their students as “bad” reveals that the individual characteristics that represent deficiencies show similar distributions, and only the perceived deficits in professional expertise were ahead of humour, which were usually below the threshold of perception.

On the basis of the conclusions of the preliminary studies, further questions and objectives emerged, for the examination of which I used new theories and methods in the research. The preliminary studies relied on questionnaire-based data collection. I had had no prior information on the teachers examined, and therefore the results could not be verified. Therefore, the objective I set was, in addition to improve the student questionnaire, to gather data on the teachers examined and then to confirm or refute the students' opinions with the help of case studies.

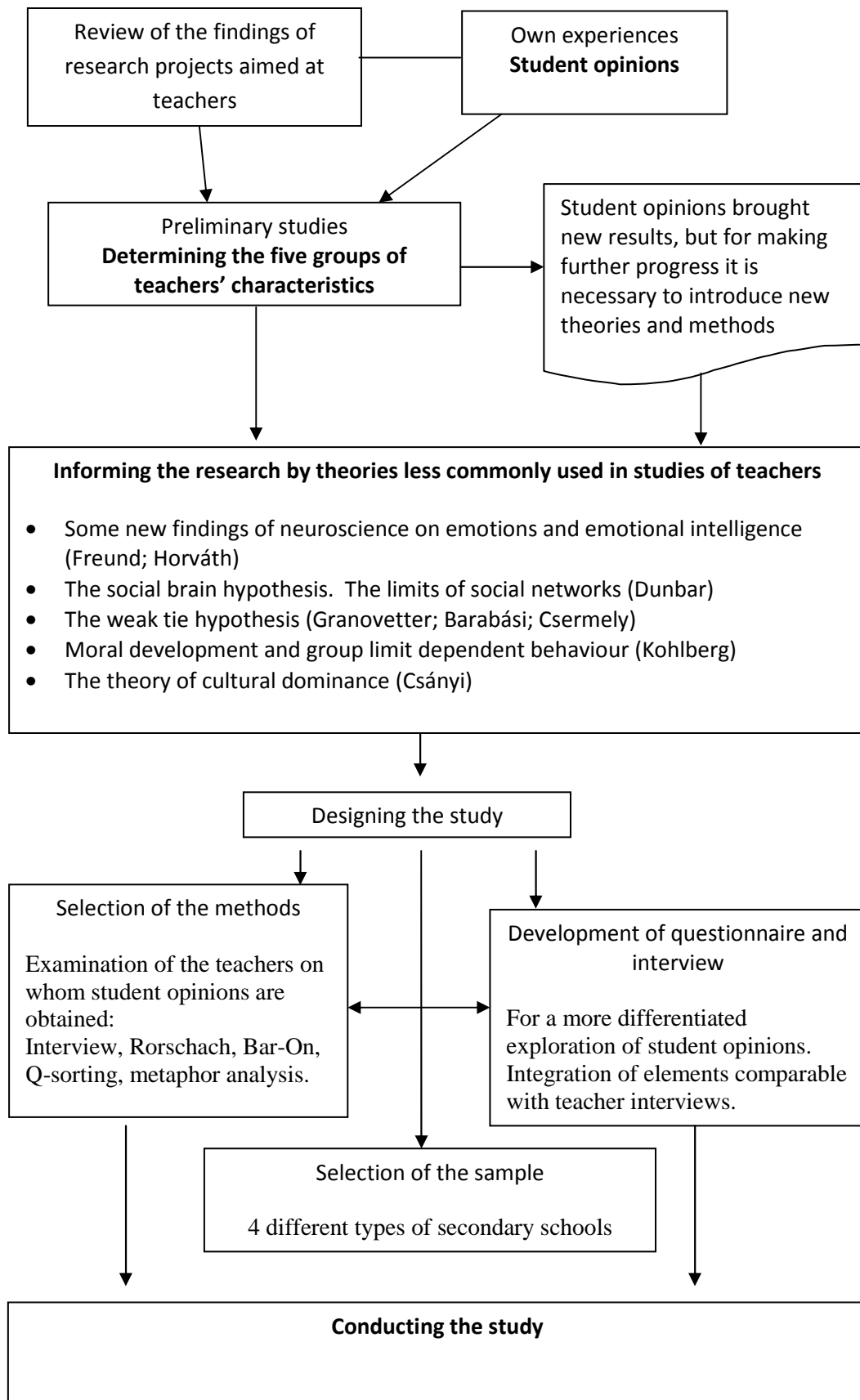
Student opinions, the expectations and competencies related to teachers have been examined in several studies both in Hungary and abroad, and numerous studies have been written on the characteristics of teachers and the possibilities for the development of teacher candidates, but in the course of my review of earlier scholarship in this field I have not encountered a study in which student opinions were compared against data gathered on the teachers, and therefore, I chose this as my field of inquiry.

The objectives of the research project

- Identifying the characteristics that determine the evaluation of teachers in the opinion of their students.
- Mapping the connections between the characteristics determining teachers' quality and data on the performance of their students.
- Exploring the background factors in the personality of teachers considered as "good" and "bad," as well as in the interpretation of their own roles.
- Selecting indicators from among the characteristics determining the quality of teachers.
- Formulating recommendations for teacher training programmes.

	Hypotheses	Methods
1.	I assume that the basis of students' evaluation of teachers is not simply sympathy, but that it reflects a broad range of criteria and values.	Student opinions, questionnaire
2.	I assume that the teachers' characteristics determined on the basis of the student opinions can be linked to the results from the examination of the teachers.	Student opinions, questionnaire Bar-On, Rorschach, Q-sorting, metaphors, interviews with teachers
3.	I assume that the teacher-student relationship is a weak tie.	Student opinions, questionnaire, interviews with teachers.
4.	Negative manifestations in the classroom can be linked to the quality of the teacher-student relationship.	Student opinions, questionnaire. Interviews with teachers.
5.	I assume that teachers considered by students as "bad" teachers have a mistaken perception of the elements of the social field surrounding them as related to students.	Student opinions, questionnaire, interviews with teachers.
6.	I assume that differences between teachers considered as "good" and "bad" are also manifested in emotional/social intelligence.	Student opinions, questionnaire. Bar-On test.

The process of the research



The sample

The studies were conducted in 2009 and 2010 in four secondary schools – two secondary grammar schools, one bilingual secondary vocational school of technology and one private (foundation) school – in Budapest.

In the selection of the respondents, one criterion was that they had been students of the given school for at least two years. The sample consisted of 147 secondary school students and 6 teachers. 47% of the students were men and 53% were women. Their age was between 16 and 18.

The method used allowed students to freely choose among their teachers; therefore, the exact number of teachers chosen by the students cannot be determined. The only thing that can be stated about them is on the basis of what features the given student chose the given teacher as the best or the worst. The teachers involved in the qualitative analysis included two women and four men. Their demographic data are discussed in detail in the individual analyses. The six secondary school teachers were selected on the basis of the positive or negative opinions of their students.

The methods of the study

In the course of the semantic analysis of the student opinions, the personality-dependant characteristics dominated; therefore, I chose the Rorschach test as the method suitable for the examination of the entire personality. The Q-sorting method was expected to provide data concerning the teacher's role. The Bar-On test was included among the methods for the purpose of exploring the emotional and social intelligence of the subjects. The interview provided a good opportunity to gather personal impressions, while the thematic, questionnaire-based elements designed to measure the teacher's attitudes provided an opportunity for statistical comparisons. The metaphors enriched the totality of the picture on the personality and the interpretation of roles.

Questionnaire

The questionnaire was designed as the result of developments based on many years' experiences. The original version, which collected teachers' characteristics perceived by students, was supplemented with questions making emotional and relational status also quantifiable with some less attitude-dependant, rational elements, and the measurable data of student performance. This development was made with the aim for the new elements to reinforce and differentiate the answers received to the open-ended questions, and to make them comparable with data collected from the teachers. I supervised the filling in of the questionnaires in the secondary schools myself, ensuring both the students and the

teachers of anonymity, and that the data would not get back to the schools in order to prevent any possible negative consequences on the respondents.

The methods used for the examination of the teachers

Interview

It appeared that the most reliable method for gathering data from the teachers would be structured interviews. One part of the interview consisted of questions suitable for making comparisons with the students' questionnaire. Further questions were aimed at values, emotional and relational elements, as well as attitudes related to students and the teacher's role. Free associations were possible with the use of the metaphors, while the observations made during the interview allowed the collection of impressions. Interviews were conducted personally, in closed rooms of the schools, with undisturbed conditions.

Q-sorting

It is difficult to make scales for the examination of the attitudes of the subject that are consistent and hard to manipulate. The Q-methodology promised to be suitable for the weighing of rational, emotional, relational and value system based elements. Its advantage is that it allows the examination of subjective opinions with the use of statistical methods. The Q-methodology requires the subjects examined to arrange 25 to 120 (in my study, 68) statements related to the given topic in a pre-defined matrix, on the basis of an order of preference built on their own attitudes. The method enforces ranking on the basis of the dimensions that are least and most characteristic of the respondent, thereby eliminating one of the reliability problems of attitude scales. In case of the Q-methodology, the respondent is forced to decide between the emerging alternatives. The method allows little opportunity for hiding; at worst, the distorting effect of wishing to comply with the assumed expectations may occur in case of the well-controllable statements. The cognitive supervision of the large number of statements with a manipulative intention is cumbersome, almost impossible. The statements used in the study included rational, emotional, relational and value system based elements appearing in the teacher's role. The teachers carried out the Q-sorting in the presence of the supervisor of the experiment, by way of sorting statements printed on cards. (Izsó – Horváth, 2006)

Bar-On test

The preliminary studies called attention to the importance of the emotional, relational/social elements. The test (Bar-On, R. 2006) was prepared for the exploration of exactly this interface. The Bar-On test has already been used for the examination of students, in a university environment. (Takács, 2009) On the basis of the experiences, it was expected that the method would provide valid data on the character of the teachers,

and that in its factors the emotional and relational characteristics that support the effectiveness of the teacher's role could be identified.

Rorschach test

This is the tool suitable for the most sensitive and differentiated personality analysis. For persons not familiar with the operation of the test, it cannot be manipulated. Efforts on the part of the subjects to hide can be identified. The test is suitable for the mapping of the entire personality of the subject. It opens up dimensions that cannot be detected with other methods, or only with difficulties. Among bad teachers, the preliminary studies already suggested personality distortions and raised the suspicion of pathological backgrounds. The method aimed to confirm or refute these assumptions. The use of a stable personality analysis method also seemed inevitable, since personality came into the focus of the studies. Contrary to the Rorschach test, the questionnaire-based method and tests including questions that can be cognitively controlled are exposed to self-protecting and façade-building efforts by the subject examined, and can be therefore easily manipulated.

Metaphor analysis

Metaphors bring to the surface the contents attached to the area of thoughts concerned in a projective way. Their cognitive control is hard to realize, and therefore, the information obtained this way is reliable, although its interpretation also requires some subjectivity. Interviews provided an opportunity for the joint interpretation of the metaphors of the subject examined, which reduced subjectivity/margin of error, thus enhancing the validity of the method.

Characteristics of the individual analyses

The selection of the good and bad teachers took place on the basis of the choices of the same student sample. In case of the six teachers examined, the opinions of the students who marked a given teacher as either good or bad were identifiable. This provided an opportunity to compare the results of the interviews and tests with the teachers against the individual profiles of the given teachers rather than just with the good or bad profiles that are generally applicable to the entire population of good or bad teachers. Due to constraints of space and also for methodological reasons, I did not aim to draw up complete and detailed personalities; instead, I concentrated on those characteristics that coincided with the areas concerned in the opinions of the students or that significantly influence the teachers' production interface. The individual teacher profiles allowed me carry out the analysis with the use of quantitative research methods, where the individual comes forward from behind statistical averages and emerges in character profiles and narratives.

Research findings

In the following, I will summarize the main findings of the dissertation in the sequence of the hypotheses:

I assume that the basis of students' evaluation of teachers is not simply sympathy, but that it reflects a broad range of criteria and values.

- The characteristics perceived by secondary school students could be placed in the same categories as in the preliminary studies.
- In Chapter 5 it was proved that not only the emotional elements strongly informing the attitudes, but the rational and ascertainable data also support the opinions of the students.
- The students considered those teachers as better who required them to perform significantly more work academically.
- The students preferred their good teachers more than they experienced the reciprocity of the same, which means that it was not the kindness of the teachers that was reciprocated with the complimentary title of “best teacher”.
- They perceived in an outstanding manner the values of the personality, which shows strong overlap with the cultural dominance. The cultural dominance, intelligibility, humour and good working relationship were motivating factors of the efforts invested by the students.

On the basis of the above, the hypothesis can be regarded as confirmed.

I assume that the teachers' characteristics determined on the basis of the student opinions can be linked to the results from the examination of the teachers.

- The individual analyses provided an opportunity for the comparison of the student opinions against the results of the studies conducted on the teachers. These were mainly relationships that are ascertainable by way of quantitative analytical methods, as well as narratives. The results of the Rorschach test and the data gathered in the course of the teacher interviews reinforce the student opinions. The balanced nature of the psychic and relational factors could be confirmed in case of good teachers, and their disturbances in case of bad ones.
- The academic results achieved by students in the subjects of bad teachers were significantly weaker; further, we can find very little effort invested behind these on the part of the students. It was only the Bar-On test examining emotional intelligence that did not confirm the differences between good and bad teachers as perceived with the use of all the other methods. The reasons for these have to be sought in the method.

The explanation can be found in the fact that the method does not perceive the elements manifested in weak links. The characteristics of the strong tie field and the dissimulation that could be identified in some cases masked the characteristics of the weak tie field.

The students validly perceive the differences between the bad teachers. With the exception of the Bar-On test, the student opinions and the results obtained with the use of the other methods coincided, which means that the hypothesis can be regarded as confirmed.

I assume that the teacher-student relationship is a weak tie.

- On the basis of the analysis of the theoretical conditions of weak ties, the hypothesis can already be considered as confirmed with a high level of probability. The characteristics of weak ties – difference in status, low number of personal contacts made, the nature of the relationship formed, the number of ties and its effect on the class as a system – can be identified in teacher-student relationships.
- On the basis of the relational characteristics experienced by the students, as well as the evaluation by teachers of their relationship with their students, friendships can be excluded even in the case of good teachers' relationship to their students.
- The results of the Bar-On test differ in most cases from what the student opinions, Rorschach test results and the observations obtained in interviews indicate on the basis of the emotional-social intellect of the teacher. There is one exception, when the deficit of the emotional-social relational skills of the subject examined is manifested also in the equal/strong tie field, remaining isolated from his/her colleagues. From this we can draw the conclusion that teacher-student relationships, which are not strong ties, cannot be examined with the use of the Bar-On test.
- As Barabási and Csermely proved with respect to both biological and social space, in the absence of suitable weak ties, communication becomes burdened with much noise, there are more misunderstandings and misinterpretations, and the intelligibility of the teacher is weakened. This interrelation is significant in the case of both good and bad teachers.
- The government of New Zealand has recognized the harmonizing force of weak ties, and would like to utilize their beneficial effects among teachers. As an interesting fact it should be mentioned that, according to its author, the hypothesis has never been applied to teacher-student relationships. (Barabási, 26.01.2010, personal information)

The results of the study identify the most important characteristics of weak ties in teacher-student relationships, thus confirming that the latter is in the category of weak ties.

Negative manifestations in the classroom can be linked to the quality of the teacher-student relationship.

- Good relational conditions and malevolence are in a significantly opposite correlation.
- In the individual analyses, in the relational ties depicted in the social space, there are mutually low values in case of good teachers, and high values in case of bad ones. With respect to two of the teachers examined, the school, the subject taught and the group of students providing opinions were identical, making the comparison the most reliable from a statistical point of view. The opposite correlation is very marked.
- A significantly opposite correlation can be identified in the sub-sample of bad teachers between the relational quality and malevolence. On the part of the teachers, the correlation was $r = -0.266$ $p \leq 0.01$ whereas in the case of the students it was $r = -0.348$ $p \leq 0.001$.

I assume that those considered by students as “bad” teachers have a mistaken perception of the elements of the social field surrounding them as related to students.

In the individual analyses, some of the data from the teachers and students pertaining to the social space can be compared. The diagrams and the analyses confirm the hypothesis. Due to the small number of elements, the confirmation of the hypothesis could not be carried out using statistical methods, but the link can be depicted graphically.

I assume that differences between teachers considered as “good” and “bad” are also manifested in emotional/social intelligence.

The confirmation of this hypothesis on the basis of the Bar-On test results was not possible, since the test only signalled a significant difference in case of a single subject. This, however, enriched the findings of the study with one more hypothesis, namely that the test does not sense the level of emotional and social intellect manifested in teacher-student relationships, which count as weak ties. It did signal in cases, where the strong ties of the subject also functioned badly. Due to the significant differences from data obtained from methods less susceptible to manipulation, the suspicion of façade-protecting dissimulation also emerged.

Unexpected results

- **Several results obtained in the course of the analysis of the Q-sorting indicate the efforts made by bad teachers to find a way out.** Bad teachers felt, and two of them also admitted, that cooperating with the students posed significant difficulties for them. They suspected that they had to develop in some way. They expected the solution from the improvement of their knowledge of their subject taught, as well as

from mastering new pedagogical methods. The studies indicated that this means a total misunderstanding of their situation, since it is not development, but change that they need. Such change should take place in their emotional/relational characteristics, in their models of their own role, or perhaps in their personalities. In awareness of their situation, this is not possible without help.

- **The manifestation of the Jungian shadow.** The effect of the shadow, within the meaning used by Jung (Jung, 2000) appears, it is assumed, only on the level of the unconscious. The entire preference sequence of the 68 statements of the Q-sorting text cannot be consciously controlled. Bad teachers reject the preferred characteristics of their own worst teachers with respect to themselves, and profess or just proclaim the opposite. They deny the shadow, and would like to get rid of it, but it is manifested in their behaviours. Their students see in them the person appearing in the shadow rejected by them (i.e. the bad teachers). According to Rogers, as long as someone denies and fights against rejected emotions, experiences or content, they will not be able to come to terms with it and to change. They are aware of what they should not be following, but they are unable to eliminate it from their behaviours and roles, and they cannot come to terms with it, which means that any in-service training or development method that aims to achieve a change in the attitudes, behaviours and interpretations of own roles with the help of further rational knowledge is expected to yield no results.
- **Cultural dominance as a virtue of the personality.** The attention, motivation, discipline of students, as well as the work they have invested, are a function of the subjective reality experienced by them. A high-priority element of this is the personality of the teacher, and within that, in particular, the cultural dominance described by Csányi.

Recommendations for teacher training programmes

Good and bad teachers receive training of comparable quality. The cognitive contents pertaining to the role of the teacher are available to each of them. They also regularly receive feedback from their students. The group of bad teachers, however, is unable to correctly interpret their own situation, and therefore, they are incapable of engaging in realistic self-reflection and thus, self-correction. The interpretation of information from

the feedback, the formation of new behavioural patterns is almost hopeless without assistance.

- Bad teachers expect improvement from the development of pedagogical, methodological and professional skills and competencies; by contrast, we can state that the root of the problems can be found in the personality, the interpretation of one's own role as a teacher, as well as in the emotional and relational conditions. We also know from the findings of international studies that the quality of teachers does not correlate with higher qualifications obtained in formal education or certificates proving the acquisition of new competences. There is no way out for bad teachers from their predicament in the direction of currently known forms of formal education. Becoming a good teacher can be expected from a change in the emotional and relational elements, changes also affecting the role and the personality, and from the subsequent development of the changed role. The change must take place in the personality-dependent characteristics with the support of a mentor or psychologist, in the framework of cooperation in the general atmosphere of trust.
- In a hostile social space, the efforts of aversion do not allow the changing of the already unstable model of the role. It is difficult to reconstruct a fortress that is under siege, to demolish a part of it in the hopes of then building a stronger one.
- In teacher training programmes, efficient techniques aimed at personality development or personality development groups were mainly used in experiments only. These require the work of trained psychologists over the course of many years, and they also involve high costs, while promising little result.
- My recommendation would be the introduction of "sensitive microteaching analysis" and "sensitive teaching analysis," focusing on the emotional and relational elements, also suitable for the shaping of the experiences involved with the role at hand. (Suplicz, 2011) A part of the personality traits is only manifested in certain situations, and in this realistic situation the role as well as the personality traits supporting that role can be developed in a targeted and efficient way. On the basis of the correct interpretation of the complex influences and reflections emerging in the social field, real evaluations of the situation can be achieved and mistaken attributions can be reduced to minimum.
- According to the lessons drawn from the study, the teachers considered as bad by their students are in a situation that is hardly bearable. The place of their failures is the school itself.
- It is my recommendation that students' opinions should be obtained for all teacher candidates, and on the basis of these opinions, teachers considered as problematic should be given help by mentors and/or psychologists, since in a significant number of

these cases it is not a pedagogical, but a personality-dependent problem that needs to be addressed.

- I also recommend that the training of mentor teachers supervising the teaching practice of candidates should be changed in such a way that they should be capable of mentoring changes in case of teachers considered bad by their students as well, struggling with significant difficulties, also in case of problems concerning the interpretation of their roles or with relations with students.

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