The “Teacher’s Pet” phenomenon

Do you remember the term “teacher’s pet”? There is a good chance you might have heard this term when you were school. Often, this term was not used kindly to refer to another student and often it implied that the student was somehow favoured or given preferential treatment by the teacher. But is a teacher’s pet always associated with a negative response from other students? Is having a teacher’s pet always bad for classroom morale?

Babad (1995) conducted a study to explore the links between student perceptions of teacher differential behaviour and student morale in classrooms where there was a “teacher’s pet”. “Teacher’s pets” were defined as those students with whom the teachers had a special relationship. This relationship is similar to the “attached” teacher-student relationship and is identified by genuine love and affection for the student.

The participants of this study were 2475 fifth and sixth grade students in 80 different classrooms. Students were asked to rate the popularity of each of their peers and identify students in a range of categories including students who the teacher “likes the most” and the student whom the teacher “loves the most”. Each student also completed a survey of classroom morale and satisfaction and an assessment of the teacher’s differential behaviour.*

Who were the “teacher pets”?

The study found that 51% of classrooms had no exclusive teacher’s pet, while 36% had several pets, and 13% of classrooms had an exclusive (single) teacher’s pet. Pets were more likely to be girls and more likely to be academically good (although not necessarily the best) students.

Did classrooms with teacher pets have differential behaviour?

The study analysed the extent of teacher’s differential behaviour towards high and low achievers in classrooms where there were teacher’s pets. In classrooms where teachers had pets, the teacher was more likely to:
Give more emotional support to high achieving students and much less to low achieving students.

Give more learning support to high achieving students and slightly less to low achieving students.

**Did differential behaviour affect student morale?**

Differential levels of emotional support and learning support resulted in lower levels of morale and satisfaction. When teachers showed more positive affect to high achievers, classroom morale declined. Teachers who showed more positive affect towards low achievers were better liked by their students and classroom morale and satisfaction was higher.

**Did the popularity of the teacher’s pet make a difference?**

Yes! When the teacher’s pet was also popular among their peers, students did not report lower morale. However, in classrooms where the teacher’s pet was not popular among their peers, morale was much lower.

Two main conclusions can be drawn from these findings. First, teachers’ differential behaviour, particularly their negative emotional treatment of low achievers, was related to low morale and negative feelings about the teacher. Second, classrooms where there was a teacher’s pet did not necessarily have low morale. In fact, low morale only occurred when the pet was not a very popular student. It appears students expect their teachers to show more support for low achievers than higher achievers, and they feel badly when this does not occur. However, students are quite happy to have a teacher’s pet in their classroom if they also like the teacher’s pet.

Once again, a linkage appears between teacher-student relationships and peer relationships in the classroom; but students are not simply swayed by the power of popularity – they also have empathy and concern for the low achievers in their classrooms.

*Read the full study to see all variables and relationships assessed.*

Activities

1. Do a quick survey of your peers – do they recall a classroom “pet” when they were at school? Did they have any positive or negative feelings about this as a school student?

2. Discuss the findings relating to lower levels of emotional warmth for low achievers. Why might this occur and how will you try to avoid this in your classroom?

3. Why do you think students were positive about “popular” pets? What type of qualities might these students possess that make them popular with both teachers and students?