Pre-service Teachers' Responses to Students' Misbehavior in the Classroom Depend on Students' Ethnicity: A Pilot Study

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Abstract

This study experimentally investigated preservice teachers' responses to student misbehavior according to the ethnic background of the student. Preservice teachers were presented with a verbal description of either an ethnic minority or an ethnic majority student. Afterwards, they were asked to estimate how likely they would be to apply each of 12 intervention strategies ranging from very mild to very harsh interventions. The results showed that preservice teachers consistently applied more strategies, and often harsher ones, in response to ethnic minority students' misbehavior. Results are discussed in terms of the mechanisms that might underlie this ethnic bias among preservice teachers.

Keywords: preservice teachers, classroom behavior, student ethnicity

Introduction

Students from ethnic minorities face many disadvantages in school. They tend to score lower on academic achievement (Dee, 2005), attend the lower school tracks (Caro, Lenkeit, Lehmann, & Schwippert, 2009), and leave school much earlier—often without certification—(Coneus, Gernandt, & Saam, 2009) compared with their ethnic majority peers. Research has also shown that teachers as well as preservice teachers might contribute to such achievement-related disadvantages (Glock, Krolak-Schwerdt, Klapproth, & Böhmer, 2013; Glock & Krolak-Schwerdt, 2013). However, although academic achievement judgments are important, they are not the only task that teachers perform in their daily routines. More prevalent is the daily student-teacher interaction in the classroom, which might also have vital consequences for both teachers and students. This student-teacher interaction might suffer from student misbehavior (Spilt, Koomen, & Thijs, 2011). When students disrupt classroom interactions with inappropriate

behavior such as talking with classmates, teachers' behaviors toward these students might become more negative. Although research has shown that ethnic minority students tend to experience disadvantages in daily classroom interactions (Tenenbaum & Ruck, 2007) as well as in punishment (Skiba, Michael, Nardo, & Peterson, 2002), it is not yet known whether they also suffer from biases with respect to preservice teachers' responses to disruptive student behavior. Hence, this study was aimed to close this research gap.

Theoretical Framework

Disruptive student behavior can be defined as any kind of student behavior that interferes with the current activity plan in a lesson (Doyle, 2006). This definition is broad, and the perception of student behavior as disruptive can vary from teacher to teacher (Kulinna, Cothran, & Regualos, 2006) and depend on the context (Doyle, 2006). Disruptive student behavior might be prevented by good classroom management (La Paro, Pianta, & Stuhlman, 2004). Good classroom management is related to a positive climate (Emmer & Stough, 2001) and is thus pivotal for creating a supportive learning environment for the students (Chapel, Whitehead, & Zwozdiak-Myers, 2004). In this vein, research has shown that good classroom management is a necessary prerequisite for positive student outcomes (Wang, Haertel, & Walberg, 1993). According to the ecological approach (Doyle, 2006), classroom management involves establishing class rules. Not only should these rules be communicated, but they should also be practiced in order to provide students with the procedures and rituals that are necessary for implementing them (Emmer & Stough, 2001). This does not necessarily mean that teachers should dictate the rules but that students and teachers should work together to establish appropriate rules (Evertson & Weinstein, 2006). Nevertheless, the rules should clearly specify what kinds of student behavior are acceptable and which ones are not. In addition, the rules should be adhered to consistently (Ophardt & Thiel, 2013). Rules are also a part of time management (Evertson & Harris, 1992), which, once established, provides a behavioral framework for the students in transition phases that are susceptible to disruptions such as the distribution of worksheets. The ecological approach specifies preventive strategies that provide teachers with tools that can be used to maintain order in the classroom. These strategies were first formulated by Kounin (1970). He emphasized four main strategies: overlapping, withitness, group altering, and smoothness. These strategies allow the teacher to monitor the students and keep students' attention at an appropriate level while simultaneously leading the class through the lesson (i.e., following the activity plan; Doyle, 2006).

However, classroom management also entails intervention strategies, which must be applied when disruptive student behaviors occur. Although it is necessary for teachers to clearly specify that there are consequences for disruptive behavior (Hardin, 2008), teachers can also decide to apply intervention strategies that maintain the focus on the instructional activity (Piwowar, Thiel, & Ophardt, 2013). In a first step, these minimal interventions

include ignoring the disruptive behavior (Ophardt & Thiel, 2013). If the disruptive behavior continues, further minimal interventions should be applied in a second step (e.g., nonverbal signals). In a third step, direct interventions such as very short verbal reactions that include referring to the rules might be appropriate (Ophardt & Thiel, 2013) and successful (Emmer, Evertson, & Worsham, 2003). In a last step, teachers will need to interrupt the activity plan in order to intervene. Such interventions should show clear consequences. Across this whole process, it is pivotal that the teacher-student relationship, which is crucial for good classroom management (Marzano & Marzano, 2003), does not suffer from these interventions (Ophardt & Thiel, 2013). Nevertheless, teachers should rigorously show that disruptive student behavior is not acceptable. Ideally, interventions will not interrupt instructional activities for very long, and teachers are well advised to avoid confrontations with students in front of the class (Shukla-Mehta & Albin, 2003).

Research has shown that teachers use a wide range of strategies to reestablish order in the classroom (Kulinna, 2008). Strategies have included mild and minimal interventions, as well as harsh strategies. Although teachers have been found to use a wide range of punishment and reprimands (Lewis, Romi, Qui, & Katz, 2005), most of their interventions tend to be positive and mild. Notwithstanding these findings, teachers have been found to punish students from ethnic minorities more frequently than they punish ethnic majority students (Skiba et al., 2002) and to interact with ethnic minority students in a more negative way (Tenenbaum & Ruck, 2007). This differential treatment of ethnic minority students cannot be conveniently explained by higher rates of disruptive behavior or student misbehavior (Peguero & Shekarkhar, 2011; Skiba et al., 2002).

Not only do teachers punish ethnic minority students more frequently, but they also have been found to suspend such students from school more often (McFadden et al., 1992; Peguero & Shekarkhar, 2011; Raffaele Mendez & Knoff, 2003; Rausch & Skiba, 2004; Skiba et al., 2011, 2002) even when the frequency of disruptive behaviors was controlled for (Bradshaw, Mitchell, O'Brennan, & Leaf, 2010). This might be a result of teachers' biases in their estimations of the frequency of disruptive behavior shown by ethnic minority students (Chang & Demyan, 2007; Downey & Pribesh, 2004). More specifically, in one study, teachers reported viewing the disruptive behavior of ethnic majority students as quite normal but rated the same behavior as pathological when it was performed by ethnic minority students (Ferguson, 2001).

It is important to note, however, that the above-mentioned research findings all refer to experienced teachers, who are less sensitive to disruptive student behaviors than preservice teachers are (Fogarty, Wang, & Creek, 1983) and who tend to apply a wide range intervention strategies including mild and positive ones. Preservice teachers, on the other hand, were found to be more likely to feel the need to act in an authoritarian way (Wubbels, Brekelmans, den Brok, & van Tartwijk, 2006). They also reported feeling ill-prepared in

classroom management and in effectively responding to disruptive student behaviors (Sabar, 2004).

Thus, the question arises as to whether preservice teachers also apply a wide range of strategies and whether their application of strategies depends on student ethnicity. With special regard to students' ethnic minority background, preservice teachers might differ markedly from experienced teachers. To this extent, experienced teachers might have undergone different socialization processes than preservice teachers, as these different teachers most likely grew up in quite different environments (Raines, 2002). Being younger, preservice teachers most likely experienced more culturally diverse environments because they had ethnic minority peers in school as well as at their colleges or universities (Rokitte, 2012). In this sense, research has shown that cross-ethnic friendships lead to lower levels of prejudice (Levin, van Laar, & Sidanius, 2003), and it can be assumed that a person with a larger number of ethnic minority peers will have a larger number of cross-ethnic friendships.

Moreover, nowadays, teacher education programs prepare preservice teachers for cultural diversity (Jennings, 2007) and have shown a shift toward multicultural perspectives (Gay, 2010). Teachers with a multicultural perspective in teaching or high multicultural beliefs tend to celebrate cultural diversity in the classroom and make profound use of cultural differences in their teaching (Bakari, 2003). To this end, previous research has shown that preservice teachers' level of prejudice against ethnic minority students is low (Hachfeld, Schroeder, Anders, Hahn, & Kunter, 2012). Thus, because these younger-generation preservice teachers grew up in more culturally diverse environments (Howe & Strauss, 2000; Raines, 2002), have been prepared to teach in culturally diverse classes (Jennings, 2007), and tend to hold strong positive egalitarian and multicultural beliefs (Hachfeld et al., 2011; Hachfeld, Hahn, Schroeder, Anders, & Kunter, 2015), their responses might not be affected by students' ethnic background. The current study experimentally investigated this idea.

Method

Participants and Design

Forty German preservice teachers from the Ruhr University in Bochum (29 female) with a mean age of 23.33 years ($SD = 2.44$) participated in the study. Preservice teachers had a mean level of teaching experience of 11.38 weeks ($SD = 8.15$). Five of them had a Turkish background themselves. The study had a one-factor between-subjects design with students' ethnic background (German vs. Turkish) as the factor.

Materials

Student descriptions. A description of a student depicting one of the most frequently found types of classroom disruption was compiled: the inappropriate talking of students with their classmates (Dalgiç & Bayhan,

2014). Either a Turkish or a German student who consistently talked with his classmate was described (see the Appendix).

Intervention strategies. In Germany, interventions are identified as educational or regulatory (Keller, 2014). In the framework of pedagogical freedom, teachers are allowed to decide which educational intervention they will apply when it comes to disruptive student behavior. Regulatory interventions (e.g., suspension) are considered only when educational interventions fail and the misbehavior of the student is severe. However, such harsh interventions demand that teachers first inform the school principal, and the application of such interventions has to be decided by a council. Thus, in the current study, we offered 12 different intervention strategies to participants. These interventions consisted of very harsh, regulatory ones such as suspension, being sent to the principal, showing the student the door (the student had to wait outside the classroom for a while), and calling a school conference (Cronbach's α = .76). There were also milder ones such as ignoring the misbehavior, nonverbal reactions, reminding the student of the class rules, and verbal reactions (Cronbach's α = .64). Other interventions were located somewhere between the harsh and mild ones (moderately harsh) such as calling the parents or the class teacher, asking for a one-on-one interview after the lesson, and detention (Cronbach's α = .88). The mild and moderately harsh strategies can be classified as educational interventions.

Demographic variables. The demographic questionnaire assessed gender, age, teaching experience, and the ethnic background of the participants.

Procedure

Upon arrival, participants were asked to imagine that the subsequently described student was a member of their class. After the instructions, half of the participants were shown the Turkish student description and the other half of the participants were presented the German student description. When the participants had finished reading the description, they were presented the different interventions and asked to rate how likely they would be to apply each intervention on a 7-point Likert scale ranging from 1 *(not likely at all)* to 7 *(very likely)*. Participants were then administered the demographic questionnaire, thanked, and debriefed.

Results

Intervention Strategies

The participants' ratings of the different interventions were submitted to a 2 x 3 mixed ANOVA with the student's ethnic background (Turkish vs. German) varying between participants, and the intervention strategy (mild vs. moderately harsh vs. harsh) as a within-subjects factor. The ANOVA revealed a significant main effect of ethnic background, $F(1, 38) = 60.08$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.61$. In general, participants were more likely to apply the

Table 1

Descriptive Statistics by Students' Ethnic Background and Intervention Strategy, as well as Simple Effect Tests

Intervention Strategy	Turkish Students		German Students		
	M	*SD*	*M*	*SD*	*t* tests
Mild	5.93	0.64	5.19	0.73	$t(38) = 3.38, p < .01, d = 1.08$
Moderately harsh	5.28	0.64	3.65	0.90	$t(38) = 6.60, p < .001, d = 2.09$
Harsh	3.40	0.56	1.94	0.44	$t(38) = 9.11, p < .001, d = 2.90$

interventions to the Turkish student ($M = 4.87, SD = 0.52$) than to the German student ($M = 3.59, SD = 0.52$). The ANOVA yielded a significant main effect of intervention strategy, $F(2, 76) = 321.45, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = 0.89$, indicating differences in the likelihood of applying the different levels of intervention strategies. Participants were more likely to apply mild intervention strategies ($M = 5.56, SD = 0.78$) than moderately harsh ($M = 4.46, SD = 1.13$), $t(39) = 7.50, p < .001, d = 1.19$, and harsh ones ($M = 2.67, SD = 0.89$), $t(39) = 21.46, p < .001, d = 3.39$. They were also more likely to apply moderately harsh interventions than harsh interventions, $t(39) = 20.25, p < .001, d = 3.20$.

The interaction between ethnic background and intervention strategy was significant, $F(2, 76) = 8.44, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = 0.18$, indicating that the likelihood of applying an intervention strategy differed by the ethnic background of the student (see Table 1 for means, standard deviations, and simple effect tests). Participants were more likely to apply all of the intervention strategies to the Turkish than to the German student.

Discussion

With respect to good classroom management, the results show that preservice teachers mostly applied mild strategies, which are in favor of maintaining the action plan (Ophardt & Thiel, 2013). However, they consistently applied more intervention strategies to the ethnic minority student, independent of whether the strategy could be classified as an educational or regulatory intervention. Although it might be assumed that this generation of teachers has grown up in a more culturally diverse environment that includes ethnic minority peers in school as well as in university, they nevertheless show biases against the ethnic minority students. One explanation might involve stereotypical expectations of ethnic minority students. As culturally diverse classes might be more difficult to teach (Schönbächler, Herzog, & Makarova, 2011) and ethnic minority students might be associated with more behavioral problems in school (Pigott & Cowen, 2000), preservice teachers' responses might reflect these expectations. In this vein, research has

shown that stereotypical expectations of ethnic minority students influence preservice as well as in-service teachers' academic achievement judgments (Glock et al., 2013; Glock & Krolak-Schwerdt, 2013; Tenenbaum & Ruck, 2007). Relatedly, negative implicit attitudes are also vital when it comes to the teaching of ethnic minority students. Teachers' implicit attitudes have been found to be related to their instructional strategies (Kumar, Karabenick, & Burgoon, 2015) and consequently to students' academic performance (Peterson, Rubie-Davies, Osborne, & Sibley, 2016; van den Bergh, Denessen, Hornstra, Voeten, & Holland, 2010). Even though these previous studies focused on experienced teachers, preservice teachers have also been shown to hold negative implicit biases against ethnic minority students (Glock & Karbach, 2015; Glock, Kneer, & Kovacs, 2013). Hence, when preservice teachers expect ethnic minority students to be more difficult to manage and simultaneously hold negative implicit biases, they might feel the need to emphasize their leadership position in the classroom (Özben, 2010), particularly in classrooms with a large proportion of ethnic minority students.

Relatedly, managing classroom behavior is a time-consuming task, and ineffective strategies result in a high level of stress (Clunies-Ross, Little, & Kienhus, 2008). In line with this, student misbehavior has been shown to be one of the main factors that is related to stress and burnout (Brouwers & Tomic, 2000). Among student misbehavior, a lack of respect (Friedman, 1995; Kyriacou & Sutcliffe, 1978) and noisy classrooms (Geving, 2007) have been shown to contribute to teachers' stress. It is likely that the preservice teachers in our study engaged in more interventions when faced with the ethnic minority student because the teachers wanted to specifically control students from whom they expected such stressful misbehavior.

Some limiting aspects of this study should be kept in mind. Because this was a pilot study, the sample size was a limiting factor. However, the effect sizes found in this study were extremely large and could be detected even with this small sample size. Nevertheless, the results warrant further validation with a larger sample size from diverse universities. Second, only a description of male students was presented as research has shown that male students are associated with lower school adjustment than female students (Bennett, Gottesman, Rock, & Cerullo, 1995; Trautwein & Baeriswyl, 2007). However, future research should also include female students in order to investigate whether the biases that were identified for ethnic minority students are unique to male students or whether they also concern female students. In line with this, the Turkish are one of the most disadvantaged groups in Germany (Kristen, 2000). Hence, in this study, only Turkish versus German students were presented. It would be interesting to vary the ethnicity of the student such as presenting an Asian or a Russian student. This might elicit completely different results because Asian students are expected to be very disciplined (Chang & Sue, 2003) and Russian students were found to score higher in academic achievement than Turkish students (Stanat, 2003).

Third, the participants were preservice teachers. It might be plausible to assume that in-service teachers also hold stereotypical expectations of ethnic minority students (Glock et al., 2013; Glock, Krolak-Schwerdt, & Pit-ten Cate, 2015). Nevertheless, as research has shown that in-service teachers have a more profound knowledge of effective classroom management (Emmer & Stough, 2001), future research should compare preservice and in-service teachers' responses to student misbehavior and investigate whether preservice and in-service teachers choose the same intervention strategies according to the ethnicity of the student. In this study, preservice teachers' responses to student misbehavior were assessed via rating scales, and the different strategies were fixed. This might have restricted participants' freedom to choose the interventions they found most appropriate. Because the intervention strategies provided in the current study did not include positive interventions such as positive reinforcement or positive models, which teachers mostly apply (Kulinna, 2008), preservice teachers might have more strategies at hand than were provided in the study. To this end, future research should use techniques such as think-aloud techniques or interviews in order to investigate responses to student misbehavior. Such techniques might also provide insights into differences in perceptions of students from different ethnic backgrounds.

Nonetheless, this study provides the first insights into preservice teachers' handling of student misbehaviors. As such, the results show the need to implement courses in teacher education to (a) provide information about the biases that ethnic minority students experience and (b) train preservice teachers in effective classroom management. This would increase (a) the fair treatment of all student and (b) the chances that preservice teachers will enter the classroom with strategies for good classroom management at hand, thus enabling them to spend less time on behavior management. ∎

APPENDIX

Student Description

In each of your lessons, Murat/Felix consistently talks with his classmate. Notwithstanding your multiple exhortations, he does not stop. The whole class hears his constant yammering.

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