

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Student perceptions of effective and ineffective teachers: A thematic analysis of reflective self-assessments

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the high-quality and low-quality teacher characteristics based on students' own learning experiences. It is based on the input of seven college students who undertook a guided self-reflection with Ormrod's (2023) "Self-Assessment 1.1." The study determines key characteristics that are linked to high and low quality teaching. Five high-quality and five low-quality teacher characteristics were determined by the students, with specific examples. Thematic analysis identified that good teachers were most frequently described as caring, patient, interactive, fair, and well-prepared. In contrast, poor teachers were described as disorganized, emotionally unstable, unengaging, unfair, and unclear in their teaching. Although the sample was small and representative of the studied group only, the reflections yielded dense data regarding how students thought and felt about their teachers' actions. The findings cannot be generalized beyond this sample due to the limited sample size (N=7). The findings highlight the importance of students' perspectives in establishing good teaching. Given the exploratory nature of this small-scale study, the findings may offer preliminary suggestions for teacher education programs in similar contexts seeking to create teaching approaches focused on relationships, reflection, and students.

Keywords: student perception; teacher effectiveness; reflective self-assessment; teaching characteristics

1. Introduction

Effective teaching has a great influence on students' academic performance, motivation, and emotional development^[1]. According to recent research, teacher-student relationships play a significant role in student success, with positive interactions promoting emotional engagement and academic achievement^[1]. Additionally, emotional intelligence has been shown to be essential for teachers to connect with students, fostering better understanding and engagement with the material^[2]. These findings are crucial not only to inform teacher-student relationship improvement but also to inform teacher education and professional development. However, much of the literature overlooks the holistic nature of teaching effectiveness, where relational and instructional qualities are integrated^[1]. What's more, most studies in this field, use teacher self-report, observational data, or standardized assessments in measuring instructional quality. Helpful as these tools are, they may not entirely capture how students perceive and interpret the behaviors of their teachers.

In recent years, "student voice" has been a subject of great interest within educational communities,

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celebrated as one of the most important elements in ascertaining the quality of teaching. As the immediate consumers of classroom learning, students are ideally positioned to offer constructive feedback on both the intellectual and affective consequences of their teachers. Reflective self-assessment activities, which ask students to recall and reflect on their most effective and ineffective teachers, are a rich source of data for researching how teaching practices are recalled and lived out. Despite this, research on how students narratively construct their knowledge of effective and ineffective teaching through supported reflection is scarce.

This study adopts an integrated framework to analyze teaching quality, drawing on Stronge's (2018) model of teacher effectiveness and Hattie's (2009) concept of teacher credibility. The framework posits that teaching effectiveness is a dynamic integration of relational and pedagogical practices. It is conceptualized through two core dimensions: relational qualities—which encompass emotional support (demonstrating care and empathy), interactive engagement (fostering psychological safety), and mutual respect (valuing student perspectives)—and instructional competence, which includes clarity (coherent content delivery), fairness (transparent assessment), and accessibility (responsiveness to learner needs). By focusing on these dimensions, the study highlights the critical role of student perceptions in evaluating the interplay between interpersonal and pedagogical aspects of teaching.

The research makes use of a reflective template that has been drawn out from Ormrod's (2023) "Self-Assessment 1.1: The Best and Worst Characteristics of My Teachers." This template is designed to help students critically reflect on their learning experiences. Through the use of qualitative thematic analysis of student reflection, this research aims to look for salient teacher characteristics related to effective and ineffective teaching as well as situational contexts mediating these perceptions. These theoretical foundations suggest that teaching effectiveness should be conceptualized as a dynamic integration of relational and instructional qualities^[1,2]. Therefore, this study aims to fill this gap by foregrounding students' narrative reflections to understand how they holistically evaluate teaching quality.

2. Methods

2.1. Research design

This study employed a qualitative exploratory design, which was deemed appropriate due to the subjective nature of students' perceptions of teaching effectiveness^[3]. Thematic analysis was chosen to allow for the identification of patterns in students' reflections, as this method has been widely used in qualitative research to explore complex, context-dependent phenomena^[3]. Guided by constructivist ideology, the study was concerned with students' subjective meaning-making processes in reflecting on their own learning experiences. Thematic analysis, adhering to Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase process, was employed to inductively code patterns and themes from the participants' accounts.

2.2. Participant sample

Purposive sampling was employed in this study to ensure diversity in academic level, gender, and field of study, thereby enabling the collection of rich and contextually relevant insights into students' perceptions of teaching effectiveness. Unlike random sampling, purposive sampling prioritizes depth and nuance over broad generalizability, making it especially suitable for qualitative studies focused on subjective experiences and reflective narratives.

The final sample consisted of seven students: four undergraduates and three postgraduates, all from a single academic faculty at a Chinese university. All participants had completed at least one year of university education to ensure sufficient exposure to diverse teaching styles and classroom contexts. Inclusion criteria

were: (1) being an undergraduate or postgraduate student; (2) having at least one year of university experience; and (3) representing diverse gender and academic backgrounds to capture a wide range of perspectives. Participants were recruited through in-class announcements and referrals from course instructors. Interested students were invited to complete a brief screening questionnaire to ensure they met inclusion criteria.

A sample size of seven was determined to be sufficient based on the qualitative principle of “information power,” which posits that the more relevant and detailed the data provided by participants, the fewer participants are needed^[3]. Furthermore, thematic analysis prioritizes the depth and richness of individual narratives over statistical generalizability, aiming to capture the nuanced ways in which participants interpret their experiences^[4].

2.3. Data collection

The data gathering consisted of a guided reflective self-assessment adapted from Ormrod’s (2023) “Self-Assessment 1.1: The Best and Worst Traits of My Teachers.” The key variables examined in this study include good teaching traits (e.g., clarity, fairness, emotional support) and poor teaching traits (e.g., disorganization, emotional volatility, disengagement), which were defined to guide consistent interpretation across participants. The self-assessment requested the participants to list five good teaching traits and five poor teaching traits based on their own experiences and perceptions, with specific examples of classroom behavior.

To create expectations of consistency, the participants were provided with explicit instructions, an annotated example, and definitions of key terms such as clarity, fairness, and engagement. The two-week period for responses, received through Google Forms in word counts ranging from 510 to 910 words, was anonymous. The open-ended nature of the questions provided an opportunity for affective as well as cognitive responses to teaching and offered more leeway compared to fixed-answer formats.

2.4. Data analysis

Thematic analysis followed Braun and Clarke’s (2006) six-step process: familiarization with the data, initial coding, generating themes, reviewing themes, defining themes, and narrative reporting^[3]. All transcripts were open-coded manually, and two transcripts were coded independently by another qualitative methods researcher to determine coding reliability. Disagreements in coding were resolved through discussion and consensus. The coding was inductive and semantic and was directed at registering participants’ overt assertions while being sensitive to the underlying affective tone and unarticulated assumptions conveyed in their narratives.

Guided by the dual-dimensional framework, we operationalized the key variables of relational qualities and instructional competence. Relational qualities were captured through teacher behaviors that demonstrated emotional support, such as using student names and inquiring about their well-being, as well as interactive engagement, which was assessed by student reports of feeling safe to participate in class discussions. Instructional competence was measured by clarity in lesson organization and coherence of explanations, as reflected in student feedback on the structure and clarity of lesson materials, and fairness, which was evaluated through consistency in grading practices and the uniform application of rubrics. This operationalization ensured that coding remained systematically aligned with the theoretical framework.

To support the credibility of the analysis, some measures were undertaken. Credibility was managed through member checking, where summary descriptions of participant comments were read back for the purpose of verification. Reflexive journaling was used throughout the analytical process for the sake of

documenting decisions, assumptions, and emerging understandings. An audit trail was utilized to follow the evolution of themes from initial coding to the final meaning. Although the study did not fully utilize bracketing, efforts were made to observe and suspend researcher bias to the greatest extent possible. Ethical clearance was sought from the institution's ethics committee before data collection began. Informed consent was given by all respondents, and they were told of the confidentiality of the responses. Because the data were sensitive in nature, all the responses were anonymized and stored securely. Despite the small sample size and local environment that may restrict generalizability, the study favored depth of understanding over extensiveness of application, which is consistent with its exploratory and interpretive orientation.

3. Results

Thematic analysis of the seven participants' self-assessments revealed a structured set of teacher characteristics categorized into two overarching domains: relational qualities and instructional competence. These domains were not isolated, but mutually reinforcing in shaping students' perceptions of effective or ineffective teaching. Within each domain, three interrelated subthemes emerged, reflecting the specific emotional, interpersonal, and instructional factors students use to evaluate teaching quality. While relational qualities referred to emotional support, presence, and mutual respect, instructional competence encompassed clarity, fairness, and accessibility.

Table 1. Frequency comparison of effective and ineffective teacher characteristics

Effective Characteristics	Mentions	Ineffective Characteristics	Mentions
Supportive and caring	6/7	Disorganized and unprepared	5/7
Clear and structured instruction	5/7	Emotionally unstable	4/7
Passionate and engaging	4/7	Uninterested and disengaged	4/7
Fair and consistent	4/7	Biased or shows favoritism	3/7
Responsive and available	3/7	Poor communication	3/7

Table 1 presents the effective and ineffective teacher characteristics reported by students, along with the number of mentions out of a total of seven participants.

On the effective side, "Supportive and caring" was mentioned by six students, "Clear and structured instruction" by five students, "Passionate and engaging" and "Fair and consistent" each by four students, and "Responsive and available" by three students.

On the ineffective side, "Disorganized and unprepared" was mentioned by five students, "Emotionally unstable" and "Uninterested and disengaged" each by four students, and "Biased or shows favoritism" and "Poor communication" each by three students.

The percentages shown in this figure are calculated based on the total number of mentions within the effective teacher traits category, rather than the total number of students (N = 7). This approach emphasizes the relative prominence of each trait among all references, providing a clearer picture of their perceived importance in students' narratives.

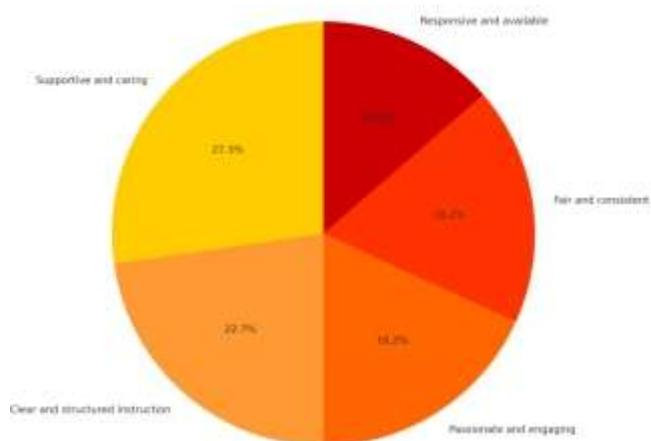


Figure 1. Distribution of effective traits

Figure 1 illustrates the distribution of effective teacher traits as reported in student reflections. “Supportive and caring” was the most frequently mentioned trait, representing 27% of all mentions, and highlighting the strong emphasis students place on emotional support and personal connection. “Clear and structured instruction” accounted for 23% of mentions, underscoring the importance of organized and coherent teaching practices. “Passionate and engaging” and “Fair and consistent” each made up 18% of the references, reflecting the value students place on teacher enthusiasm and fairness in fostering motivation and trust. Finally, “Responsive and available” represented 14% of mentions, indicating the significance of teacher accessibility and individualized support outside of class.

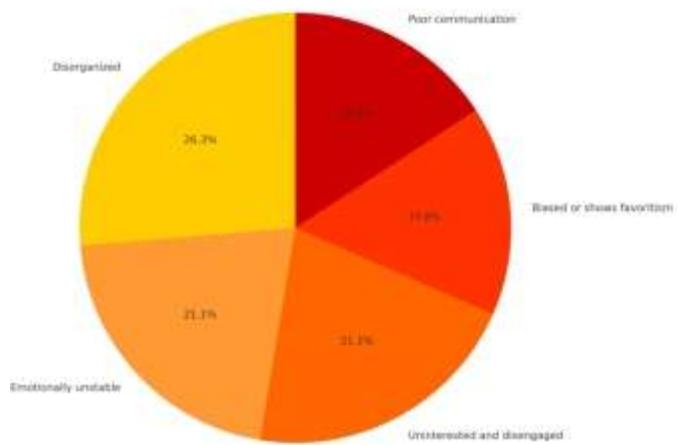


Figure 2. Distribution of ineffective traits

Figure 2 illustrates the distribution of ineffective teacher traits as reported by students. “Disorganized” was the most frequently mentioned trait, accounting for 26% of all references (5 out of 19 mentions), indicating that poor organizational skills were widely perceived as a major source of teaching ineffectiveness. Both “Emotionally unstable” and “Uninterested and disengaged” were each mentioned 21% of the time (4 out of 19), reflecting the negative impact of emotional volatility and lack of engagement on students’ learning experiences. Finally, “Biased or shows favoritism” and “Poor communication” each represented 16% of the total mentions (3 out of 19), emphasizing concerns about fairness and clarity in instructional communication.

3.1. Relational qualities: Emotional support, engagement, and trust

The participants described effective teachers as those teachers who created emotionally safe and stimulating classroom environments. The six of the seven participants all spoke highly of how important it feels “valued” and “noticed” within a classroom. One student said,

“She didn’t just teach us; she remembered our names and wanted to know how we were doing. That encouraged me to attend class” (P1).

Feeling a sense of personal recognition created students’ sense of self-worth and increased their motivation to engage with classroom activities.

Beyond explicit acts of generosity, students highly valued teachers who demonstrated genuine passion and interest as educators. Passionate teaching, defined by storytelling, humor, and emotionally expressive presentation, was found to be strongly linked with greater participation in the classroom and more favorable attitudes towards learning.

“Her enthusiastic teaching created enthusiasm for the lessons, thus making me more willing to engage” (P3).

This style of interpersonal interaction not only helped in the enjoyment of the learning culture but also helped to create a sense of psychological safety enabling the learners to feel comfortable in expressing themselves and asking questions without fear of judgment.

In addition, the students emphasized the importance of relational and emotional qualities in developing a sense of belonging to the class community. As the teachers consciously worked to develop these relationships, students felt a boost in confidence in their learning and were more willing to enter into the learning materials.

As one student said, *“When the teacher took interest in us outside of academics, I felt like I was part of the class, so participating was easy”* (P2).

In summary, these results show that relational warmth—assessed in this study through emotional support, presence, and emotional connection to students—is not only beneficial but also strongly linked to students’ cognitive engagement and their identification of the value of learning. For students, effective teachers are more than simply emotionally available; they represent a deep commitment to their students’ long-term success in school and as individuals. This affective commitment creates a climate in which students feel safe, valued, and integrated with the subject matter and their learning community.

The quality of relationships significantly affects the desire of students to attend and persist in improving their overall academic experience. When teachers emphasize affective care and demonstrate genuine concern for students’ well-being, this fosters a more positive relationship between students and teachers, in addition to a better classroom atmosphere. In this regard, therefore, teachers who demonstrate competence in relational attributes have a critical role to play in influencing the emotional and academic achievement of their students.

The results of this research highlight the need for teacher education programs to incorporate emotional intelligence and interpersonal skills as fundamental aspects of teaching efficacy. Teachers who possess the ability to connect with their students on an emotional level are able to make their learning environment more inclusive, engaging, and supportive, which is crucial to developing student success.

3.2. Instructional competence: Clarity, fairness, and accessibility

Along with relational qualities, teaching competence has become a hallmark of successful teaching. Five students particularly emphasized the importance of clear explanations, coherent lesson plans, and clear expectations.

As one student commented, *“Her slides always made sense, and she summarized main points. I never got lost”* (P4).

This comment helps illustrate the truth of students being able to understand difficult material more effectively when instruction materials are delivered cohesively and can easily be understood, and this increases their involvement with the course.

Just as significant as these factors was fairness, specifically in relation to grades, participation opportunities, and assessment. Students spoke of a firm desire for explicit grading rubrics and the application of uniform grading standards, which they construed as being representative of professionalism by the teacher and evidence of respect for them.

One student suggested, *“The grading rubric was present and applied every time, so I always knew how I was being marked, which brought a sense of security into my learning”* (P6).

This view supports the contention that the explicitness of expectations promotes a sense of equality and confidence in an educational setting.

In addition, the teacher’s availability outside of class time was a key element of good pedagogy. Students using distance-learning settings commented on how the teacher’s willingness to reply to their email at any time, combined with frequent office hours and review sessions, greatly assisted their academic achievement.

One student commented, *“She was available whenever I had a need, either by email or extra office hours. It showed me she truly cared about my learning”* (P5).

The teacher’s availability outside of class time revealed as much about her commitment as about her expertise at meeting individual student needs.

Together, these elements form a group of pedagogical practices students call instructional integrity. These include the competence it takes to fairly reflect content, grade students without bias, and exchange interactive communication during instruction. Instructional integrity allows students not just to gain knowledge, yet also see themselves as part of their classroom community, and they are treated equally. Skilled presentation of material, unbiased evaluation of students, and the presence of teachers outside of class form a climate of respect and trust, which are basic building blocks of a deep and enriching experience of instruction.

In a bid to strengthen instruction, teacher preparation must prioritize developing strong communication skills, establishing explicit and consistent policy on assessment, and recognizing the need to be available outside of the traditional school day. These skills form the basis of creating a climate conducive to instruction, which, in turn, allows students to receive appropriate challenge and encouragement.

3.3. Perceived ineffectiveness: Disorganization, emotional instability, and disengagement

By contrast, ineffective teachers were often described as being disorganized, emotionally unstable, and apathetic. Students often described experiences where lack of preparation, unclear instructions, and sudden deadline changes caused frustration and confusion.

One participant said, *“He gave us a list of readings that didn’t correspond to the test. It seemed careless”* (P6).

This incongruity between the content covered and the tests taken confused students and made them feel unprepared. The perceived lack of organization created a climate in which students were unclear about expectations, thus diminishing their ability to work with the course content in a meaningful way.

Of equal importance was the finding that teachers showed increased emotional instability. Students described situations in which teachers showed extreme mood swings, shifting between anger expressions and withdrawal, which created a climate of fear and uncertainty. One student described the situation thus: *“When he would yell at us, it was like walking on eggshells. It made it hard to concentrate on material because we were in fear of his reaction”* (P3).

This emotional instability not only affected the classroom environment but also undermined the students' psychological safety, making them incapable of concentrating on the material or ask questions without fear of retaliation.

Along with emotional instability, disengagement or a lack of emotional connection was another type of ineffectiveness. Teachers who showed a lack of engagement with student learning processes created a feeling of isolation and undervaluation among students.

One student said, *“He never looked up from his laptop. It was like we weren’t even there”* (P2).

This passive disengagement sent a message about the perceived irrelevance of the students' presence and effort and resulted in a lack of motivation to participate actively in the classroom. The lack of visible attention or interaction from the teacher caused disengagement, which eventually appeared as a lack of effort and enthusiasm on the students' part.

These findings support the idea that students see ineffectiveness as involving more than just poor presentation of material; it represents a breakdown in trust, creates uncertainty about expectations, and leads to emotional dissonance. In addition, instructional staff that are disorganized or emotionally unstable create learning climates that are viewed by students as unpredictable, risky, and ineffective. Also, disengaged teachers promote a climate marked by emotional detachment with an adverse impact on students' feelings of being challenged and worth as part of education.

To avoid these difficulties, teachers should prioritize the creation of a highly structured and predictable classroom community where students feel cared for, emotionally safe, and sufficiently informed regarding expectations. In addition, professional development should include ways of dealing with emotional reactions in the classroom, making students feel valued and respected, and stimulating an interactive and engaging classroom environment to avoid disengagement.

3.4. Interpretation of frequency patterns

The **Table 1** illustrates a clear distinction between the traits associated with effective and ineffective teachers, based on frequency across the seven participants. Notably, “supportive and caring” emerged as the most universally valued trait, mentioned by six of the seven students. This reinforces the centrality of relational warmth in shaping students' emotional engagement and long-term memory of teachers. Similarly, “clear and structured instruction” was cited by five participants, suggesting that clarity and organization remain foundational to perceived teaching quality.

On the negative end, “disorganization and lack of preparation” was the most frequently mentioned ineffective trait, aligning with prior findings that cognitive confusion undermines trust and learning^[5]. Emotional instability and lack of engagement were also highly salient, emphasizing that students not only remember what teachers taught, but how they made them feel.

Overall, the frequency distribution supports the interpretation that students evaluate teachers holistically, attending to both instructional competence and emotional climate. Even in a small sample, this convergence around core themes highlights the robustness of students' collective perceptions, providing a compelling basis for enhancing both technical and interpersonal dimensions of teacher training.

Across all themes, students portrayed effective teaching as a relational-instructional integration. They expected their teachers to be both emotionally attuned and pedagogically prepared. While each participant emphasized different traits, a recurring pattern emerged: teachers who connected with students as human beings—and taught with clarity—left the most lasting positive impressions.

4. Discussion

This study sought to explore how students define and interpret the effective and ineffective characteristics of their teachers through reflective self-assessment. Findings from the thematic analysis underscore the importance of both relational and instructional dimensions in students' perceptions of teaching effectiveness. In particular, students consistently valued teachers who demonstrated emotional support, organizational clarity, and fairness—suggesting that effective teaching is not determined by isolated behaviors, but by an integrated approach to care and competence.

4.1. Relational-Instructional integration in perceived teacher quality

Our results extend Stronge's (2018) dual-competency model by demonstrating how students subjectively internalize relational-instructional integration. Where Stronge emphasizes observable behaviors (e.g., "teacher organization skills"), participants highlighted affective consequences:

"Her clarity made me feel respected as a learner" (P4)

This aligns with Hattie's (2009) "teacher credibility" but adds a narrative layer: Credibility is not merely judged by expertise, but by how teaching behaviors make students feel (e.g., "secure" vs. "invisible"). Crucially, our framework explains why emotionally intelligent but disorganized teachers—or clear but detached instructors—were consistently rated ineffective: Students demand simultaneous fulfillment of both dimensions. However, while Hattie and Stronge often discuss these traits from an observational or outcome-based perspective, this study highlights the narrative and emotional lens through which students internalize these characteristics. That is, what students recall is not only whether the teacher delivered clear instruction, but how it made them feel—respected, safe, or invisible. This subjective processing may serve as a bridge between teaching behaviors and long-term academic identity development, an area that warrants further theoretical integration. These findings not only support but also expand on Hattie's (2009) concept of teacher credibility and Stronge's (2018) framework of dual competencies. By highlighting the emotional processing dimension, this study emphasizes the narrative memory students hold, which is often underrepresented in quantitative evaluations.

4.2. Ineffective teaching: More than just poor instruction

On the negative side, students described ineffective teachers as disorganized, emotionally volatile, or disengaged. These traits mirror those found in prior studies on teacher burnout and classroom mismanagement^[6]. Importantly, participants did not merely criticize these teachers for poor content delivery; rather, they emphasized the psychological toll of inconsistency, indifference, or public criticism. For example, emotionally volatile behaviors (e.g., shouting or mood swings) were remembered years later, sometimes more vividly than actual subject content. This aligns with recent findings that teachers' negative emotional expressions in the classroom are associated with reduced student enjoyment and engagement^[7].

This indicates that negative teacher behaviors are internalized not just cognitively but emotionally, impacting how students approach help-seeking, participation, and even self-confidence.

4.3. The role of cultural context in teacher evaluation

The findings also reveal culturally influenced expectations. Two participants noted that certain behaviors—such as authoritarian control or emotional distance—were more tolerated in high school contexts, especially in exam-oriented classrooms. Within East and Southeast Asian educational cultures, academic conscientiousness and respect for authority are likely to accompany limited emotional expression^[8]. As a result, any “bad teaching” that students encounter in university life might have been normal, or even unavoidable, in the prior years of their academic life. This highlights the importance of contextual sensitivity when explaining students’ evaluations of teachers. The definitions of “support” or “non-participation” may vary depending on age, school type or cultural expectations.

4.4. Implications for teacher education and policy

These results have implications for teacher training and school policy: Including student perceptions in teaching evaluation can lead to more informative feedback that is focused on the learners than typical measures. Teacher training must emphasize thinking and feeling at the same time, e.g., how to be emotionally supportive, ensure fairness in the classroom, and avoid subtle biases. Schools have to help teachers continuously reflect on their practice and use tools like self-reflection, peer review, and student stories to develop their own professional development.

Taken together, these reflections suggest that good teaching is not a static collection of techniques alone but an animated integration of emotional responsiveness, teaching expertise, and personal connection. While theories like Hattie’s and Stronge’s offer useful criteria, incorporating student stories adds the lived practice of those impacted by teaching. Not only does this render justice to student voices, but it also expands what we know about what actually makes for good teaching.

4.5. Limitations and future directions

This study is insightful but constrained in the small sample size (N=7) and by individuals’ recollection. Although such personal experience is revealing, it is liable to memory and emotion, which may cause bias or selective memory as a result of social pressures. Thus, the results are not generalizable but are intended to facilitate a descriptive and exploratory investigation of students’ attitudes within this specific environment. Thus, the results are not generalizable but are intended to facilitate a descriptive and exploratory investigation of students’ attitudes within this specific environment. Consequently, any implications for teacher education or policy should be considered as tentative and require validation through larger-scale studies.

Future research can build on the present study’s findings in a number of significant respects. First, the inclusion of a larger and more diverse sample pool, with more demographic heterogeneity—spanning a range of academic disciplines, institutions, and cultural contexts—would increase the generalizability and comparative force of the findings. Second, the combination of qualitative self-descriptions with quantitative measures such as teacher rating scales might achieve a more integrated understanding of the relations between subjective and codified measures. Longitudinal designs may also be of great value, enabling researchers to examine the evolution of students’ attitudes towards teaching effectiveness over time and in light of changing academic needs. Furthermore, comparisons between different cultural or institutional contexts can help clarify how different learning environments shape students’ expectations and evaluations of teacher behavior, thus advancing the conceptual framework related to effective teaching.

5. Conclusion

This research can contribute to the increasing number of studies that emphasize the value of students' voices in evaluating teaching effectiveness. By analyzing the reflective self-assessments of seven college students, we discovered how learners conceptualized recurring themes related to high-quality and low-quality teacher characteristics. The findings demonstrate that an effective teacher is not defined merely by technical competence, but by the integration of relational care and instructional clarity, which aligns with recent evidence emphasizing the role of emotional intelligence and student-centered approaches in fostering learning^[1,2].

These results reinforce the idea that students assess teachers holistically, through both affective and cognitive lenses. This perspective echoes the arguments of Dehyadegary et al. (2025), who emphasized that supportive relationships and emotional safety enhance engagement and academic outcomes. Teachers who are kind but lack structure, or who are knowledgeable but disengaged, may fail to meet students' holistic expectations. The combination of emotional presence, fairness, and instructional competence appears to be central to how students internalize teaching quality.

From a practical standpoint, this small-scale study suggests that, in similar higher education contexts with small-class settings, teacher education programs might consider moving beyond technical instruction to explicitly cultivate emotional intelligence, responsiveness, and reflective practice. This supports earlier calls for integrating emotional skills into teacher training (Hamid, 2025), though further research with larger and more diverse samples is needed to confirm these implications. Institutional evaluation systems might also benefit from incorporating qualitative feedback mechanisms that allow students to narrate their experiences, complementing traditional quantitative ratings to capture a more comprehensive picture of teaching effectiveness.

However, given the small and context-specific sample, these conclusions should be interpreted with caution and not generalized to all student populations or educational contexts. While the small sample size limits generalizability, the richness of student narratives offers meaningful insights for future research and practice. Expanding this line of inquiry with larger and more diverse cohorts, longitudinal data, or cross-cultural comparisons would further illuminate how students experience—and remember—high and low quality teaching.

Conflict of interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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