

What Makes a Teacher Bad? - Trait and Learnt Factors of Teachers' Competencies

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Abstract: The study focuses on the characteristics of teachers as can be gathered from the experiences of pupils. Our aim is to explore the situation and the traits of bad teachers on the basis of pupils' opinions. We asked current and already graduated secondary school pupils to evaluate their former teachers. We assumed that, on the basis of the pupils' experiences, we would be able to identify in these bad teachers the personality traits, cognitive and emotional elements, mistaken interpretations of their situation and role, competence deficits and other patterns of behaviour that led to the negative attitudes of their pupils. We carried out our survey with the involvement of secondary school pupils, engineer teacher trainees and engineering teachers who graduated in the past five years. We asked respondents to remember their secondary school teacher they deemed the worst and identify up to three characteristics that made them think of that person as a bad teacher. Using our experiences from earlier research projects and preliminary studies, we used semantic analysis to place the responses into five categories. We were able to classify more than 90% of the responses into these categories. The traits thus gathered were then divided into two groups on the basis of whether they are personality dependant or acquirable. It can be shown that the deficiencies in personality dependant elements (personality, emotional acceptance, humour) were the basis of the pupils' negative evaluations. Criticism concerning areas that are more easily acquirable (pedagogical shortcomings and knowledge of the subject) was also significant, but clearly less so than in case of personality dependant flaws. We have also attempted to analyse the forms of appearance of teacher's flaws, as well as the facts playing a role in their appearance and subsistence.

1 Introduction

On the basis of the results of a research project, we should think over once again how a "bad teacher" can be recognised. Why does higher education fail to properly select teacher candidates, what makes a bad teacher choose to stay in a situation fraught with frustration, and what can be done in order to help them?

One recent characteristic of recent years, even decades, is that those preparing for a career as a teacher are chosen from an ever weaker pool of candidates also in

Hungary. Higher education is increasingly showing the traits of mass education. In the new system of engineering teacher training (the BSc/MA programmes) there are few applicants, and they also arrive with increasingly weak results. The regulations have opened the doors wide to masses of modestly trained applicants. In order to maintain the quality of education in secondary schools, and also with a view to the mental health of the pupils, it is necessary that we try to filter out from teacher training and secondary schools those who are not suitable for this career. Based on studying the situation of bad teachers, the deeper knowledge of their characteristics obtained this way may provide opportunities for corrective actions both in schools and also during teacher training, and can also serve as a foundation of a well-grounded selection procedure. Since in recent decades our task has been shifting from choosing the best talents toward filtering out the less suitable applicants, it is timely that we define the circle of those concerned.

Our method is based on opinions provided by the pupils, and even though this is only one factor in the evaluation of the teachers, yet it is also perhaps the most important one. If the pupils cannot accept the teacher as a partner, the work of the latter becomes almost impossible. The teacher's knowledge of the subject, his educational work and personality values cannot be enforced, and the overall efficiency of the teacher suffers as a consequence.

The precondition of work is mutual acceptance and cooperation, which is primarily the result of the accepting emotional attitude. [10] The cognitive elements, the knowledge and intellectual level of the teacher are less frequent targets of criticism, unlike the interpersonal interface that determines the relationship between the teacher and the pupil. It is well known that teacher education is only the first stage of becoming a teacher, of the process of career socialisation. This is what causes one of the difficulties of the selection, since the local spirit and the style of the school in which one starts to teach is another opportunity (or threat?) in the formation of the role model, working style and personality of the new teacher.

The selection of good teachers in terms of quality and the development of the supporting system is continuous task, as well as permanent challenge to public education. [12]

2 The Discussion of the Research Findings

The collection of the data took place by way of voluntary, anonymous questionnaires distributed among pupils in technical secondary schools, engineering teacher training students and engineering teachers who graduated in the past five years. The current form of the questionnaire evolved on the basis of the experiences of prior surveys administered in the preceding years. The respondents filled in the questionnaires in their classes in case of secondary school

pupils and in study groups in case of college students, with the researchers being also personally present at the time. The engineering teachers in the sample, who graduated within the past five years, received a request, along with information on the purpose of the research project in e-mail, and also submitted their responses electronically. We asked the respondents to remember their worst secondary school teacher and write down up to three traits of that very person that distinguished him or her from the other teachers. Our findings are based on the surveys carried out in 2006.

The sample is not representative, which means that the conclusions are valid primarily only within the sample examined, but can also prepare the way for a strictly representative survey which can confirm or modify the trends identified in this research.

Our sample consisted of 497 respondents:

1st Engineering teachers who graduated from the Budapest Polytechnic College within the past five years, 49 persons (60% male and 40% female)

2nd Engineering teacher training students at the Budapest Polytechnic College, 73 persons (63% male and 37 % female)

3rd Pupils of a secondary school in Budapest, 375 persons (87% boys and 13% girls)

The respective age groups of the respondents were 24 to 30 in case of college graduates, 20 to 25 for college students, and 16 to 19 in case of secondary school pupils.

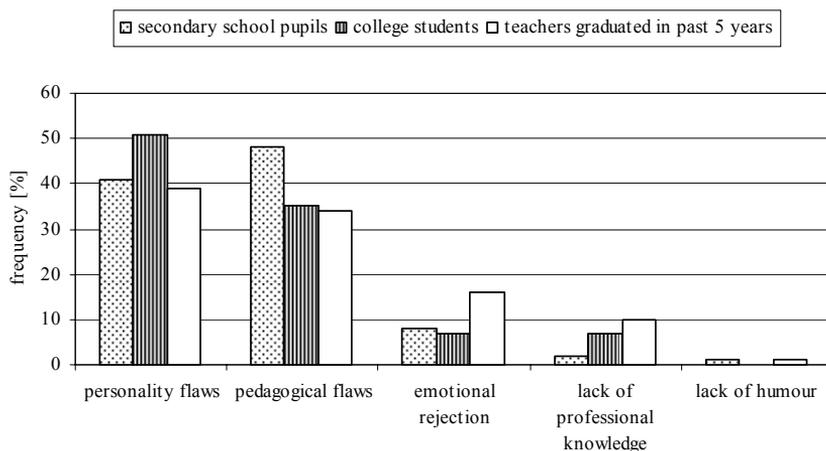


Figure 1

A comparison of the characteristics of bad teachers

The most frequently mentioned reason for the rejection of teachers was personality flaws, such as “lazy, disorganised, aloof, nervous, stressed, conceited, impetuous, moody, dumb, indifferent, stubborn...” The first two groups – of personality and pedagogical flaws – account for nearly 90% of all traits mentioned. [13]

The easier path of change concerns the elements that can be learnt, or acquired since these mobilise the self-protection mechanisms less. The practical methods of the development of pedagogical skills – class observation, micro-teaching, pedagogical and teaching practices, case analyses, group discussion of experiences, etc. – have a formative effect by way of their reflections not only on the cognitive structures but also on the personality. [5]

The changing of bad reflexes, patterns and habits, as well as the building up of new ones is conceivable by way of individualised training and supervision. [1]

In the responses of secondary school pupils, pedagogical flaws were mentioned more frequently than personality flaws. This difference may be the result of the perception of this age group. They also evaluated certain phenomena as pedagogical methods which were really rooted in the personality. Saint Thomas Aquinas, Pestalozzi and other theoreticians have emphasised the importance of the personality [9]; now, however, the analysis of the pupil's recollections led to similar results.

The second most frequently mentioned characteristic was the lack of pedagogical merits and the various related pedagogical flaws (we also included the didactic flaws here). “He cannot maintain discipline, cannot explain the material well, I do not like his methods, all he does is dictating, his classes are boring...” Behind the pedagogical flaws we can often find difficulties with the interpretation of the teacher's role, attribution mistakes, and false reflections.

We found a surprisingly low proportion of characteristics referring to emotional rejection. The absence of this merit, so characteristic of good teachers, was found almost negligible in our survey. [13] As phrased by the pupils, emotional rejection was manifested in the following ways: “not interested in the pupils, not paying attention to us, scorning the pupils, acting superior.” The signs of emotional rejection also exercise their effect through metacommunicative channels. In the long run it is virtually impossible to hide the emotions. This can define the teacher as an enemy, and can give rise to an increasingly strong mutual rejection, which impairs the efficiency of teaching and learning and is also detrimental to the atmosphere in the classroom. The teacher and the pupils become mutually suspicious of each other, and will think of evil intention behind every word or act of the other. The highly relevant words of Viktor E. Frankl also hold true for negative assumptions: “We find in the world what we were looking for in it.” Our assumptions can influence the future. [4]

The lack of professional knowledge as a characteristic feature of bad teachers was found in a mere 2-10% of the responses only. Our assumption is that even bad

teachers are able to satisfy the demands of secondary school pupils with respect to the knowledge of the subject taught. The lack of professional knowledge is mentioned more frequently with the increase of age of the respondents. Professional knowledge appears increasingly more important with age; it is assumed that the possibility for the utilisation of the knowledge is increasing, so much so that they were more sensitive to the lack of such knowledge in their responses. At the same time, the frequency of responses falling into this category did not exceed 10% even in case of engineer teachers with a degree. The pressure to meet the standards in the knowledge of the subjects taught is strong: any mistakes cannot be hidden for long, and therefore, the clearly visible mistakes on which they receive feedback must be corrected and the deficiencies made up for. The elements related to general education, interpersonal and emotional skills, however, are more difficult to measure. With the knowledge of the expectations in the teacher's role, within a certain limit, the disturbances of the psychological balance can be compensated for and hidden on the level of controlled behaviour. Pupils may regard teachers as good on the basis of their personalities or pedagogical merits even if the material they teach is not up-to-date or in case they make professional mistakes but in a good style that creates interest in the pupils. Similarly, teachers may be considered as "bad" even if they teach modern materials of high professional quality, but the material is not worked out in sufficient details and their teaching style is boring, dry and unconvincing. In the engineering education, the professional knowledge can be well measured in case of the various subjects, and therefore, the selection of students who are not suitable on the basis of their knowledge of the subject is easier. But who dares to select a teacher candidate on the basis of his personality, lack of style or unethical conduct?

In a previous study we carried out humour proved to be the fifth most frequent merit of a good teacher, and therefore we assumed that its absence would also appear as a characteristic feature in this survey. We can state that the lack of humour or the use of destructive humour (as ridicule or scorn) did feature in the responses with a frequency that could be evaluated.

3 Can a Bad Teacher Become a Good Teacher?

Before we rely on the mandatory knee-jerk reaction of educators and give a positive answer to this question, let us briefly consider the results of the survey. The majority of the characteristics that determine the quality of teachers are dependent on their personalities. However, even the best therapists rarely reported a real change of personality in their patients after several years of working with them.

Neither do we (at schools) have such strong tools at our disposal, nor the voluntarily cooperating “bad teachers” who demand change for the most part.

Another reasonable, but not very humane considerations should also be discussed. This involves the perspective of the employer. Would they want to continue to employ a teacher who appears to be inadequate for the job? Would they want to invest a lot of energy and time into people, if in a significant number of cases there will be no returns on this investment?

Could it be humane to keep “bad teachers” in the profession when at the same time it is clearly not humane with the pupils they would teach?

If we want to keep on the track of pedagogical optimism nevertheless, we should return to the results. In the United States (and also elsewhere) there have been many attempts at showing that teachers with higher qualifications are also more efficient (better) teachers. Surprisingly, these attempts – even though on the basis of such a hypothesis, the positive interrelation appeared almost certain – were able to demonstrate no, or only very weak connections. [6]

As part of our research project, we placed the characteristics of bad teachers mentioned by pupils into personality dependant and acquirable categories. In the categories shown in Figure 1, personality faults, lack of emotional acceptance and lack of humour (or using destructive humour) were included in the personality dependant category.

The acquirable categories included overcoming pedagogical shortcomings and obtaining knowledge of the profession/subject, since these are easier to learn.

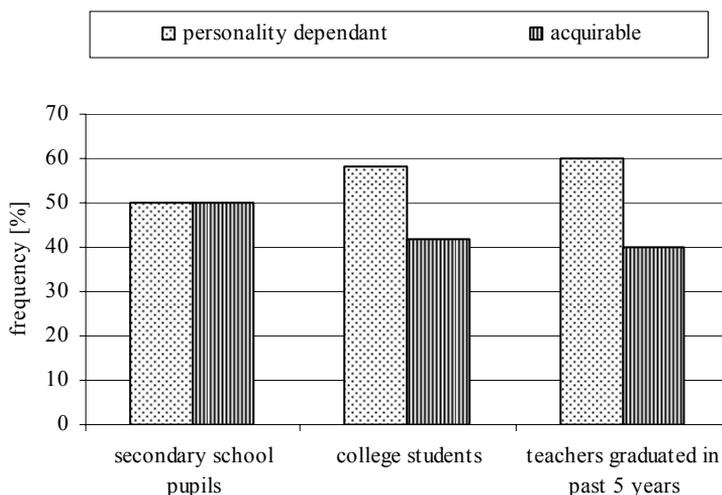


Figure 2

The proportions of personality dependant and acquirable characteristics of bad teachers

The results of the research project show that rejection can happen for two main reasons: by way of negative personality traits, dispositions, or due to the lack of acquirable competencies and incorrect understanding of the role of the teacher. With the categorisation of the results we can separate the personality dependant flaws and problems from areas that can be acquired, including in particular the pedagogical area. We have reason to assume that many elements of pedagogical work are built on the basis of the personality, and therefore, a significant part of the flaws considered pedagogical in their nature actually arise from the personality or the interpretation of the teacher's role. The personality dependant factor shown in the results of the research (Figure 2) is, therefore, at least that important, and with the further analysis of the background, this proportion may even be higher.

From the above we can draw the conclusion that those considered as bad teachers can improve their evaluation by way of enhancing their pedagogical preparation and professional knowledge, which are relatively easy to develop. Teacher training, as well as the in-service training of practicing teachers, provides good opportunities for the development of these areas. If we do not achieve the cooperation of the students, the new methods in themselves will not yield the expected result. The knowledge gained in the course of the training, and especially the experiences gathered, can lead to personality development also without a specific aim to this effect. Real changes, however, can only be expected from altering the relationship model and the role model. This is a process full of conflicts, which can only be successful with a skilled personal helper, a supervisor, or a Balint group. The deep and internal change meets much resistance in the emotional and cognitive constructions. [11]

4 Why is it Difficult to Escape being a Bad Teacher?

What patterns and regularities govern the situation of bad teachers? How does someone find himself/herself in such ignominious company? Why do pupils treat them in a hostile manner? How can this predicament be resolved?

The interface of the relationship is decisive in the estimation of a teacher, and the quality of the relationship depends on the teacher's personality and understanding of his role. Whether the pupils can accept the teacher as a person loosely related to their own group or they will consider him as a member of an enemy group almost totally detached from them is also decided here. This decision is not only dependant on the teacher, but is also influenced by the internal atmosphere prevailing in the teaching staff and generally in the school. Whether they like it or not, teachers are also members of this group, and therefore, general opinions formed about teachers and attitudes toward them will inevitably prejudice the pupils' opinions with respect to them.

If, on the basis of the first impressions, they accept the new teacher in certain situations as a group member, then even the morally less developed pupils will treat him/her with a more loyal behaviour that is due to members of one's group. This reduces conflicts, makes working together more efficient, and therefore, the teacher's values and patterns of behaviour that may be different from those of the group will be easier to accept. New, positive elements different from the group's will also be integrated into the process of socialisation. On the basis of levels of moral development defined by Kohlberg, those between the ages of 12 and 18 are typically a heterogeneous group in terms of their stages of development. [8] The formation of groups that provide coherence and safety and formulate easily achievable norms is a possible response to the uncertainties of the social space, the challenges causing anxiety. [11] Members of the group are on different levels of moral development. Individuals also waver between various developmental stages during the course of their everyday activities. The first two stages of the pre-conventional level, as defined by Kohlberg, are present in these groups. It is typical that they only observe the rules applicable to a given situation if someone enforces these rules or observance is also in their own personal interest. On the next moral level, the principle of "live and let live" takes its course. Here, the interests of the others are also taken into consideration, provided that they do not seriously conflict with their own aims. The conventional level of moral development is also present. This can be easily achieved by the majority, and is indispensable from the point of view of forming long-lasting groups. This is suitable for the formation of group norms. In this third stage, interpreted on the conventional level, the mutual interpersonal expectations, relationships and interpersonal conformity are the supposed characteristics. [2] The rules within the group are observed, and it is known by all how a "good boy" conforming to the norms of the group should behave.

But can the teacher be a loosely attached, "honorary" member of this group? The moral "umbrella" of the group may also provide protection those who are accepted and considered as good teachers. On the other hand, however, the group will show its bad side toward teachers who are considered as bad and therefore rejected. This way, it conserves the distance and gives rise to conflicts. The emotional relationships with individual pupils, groups of pupils or whole classes, as well as the personality traits, are decisive factors in the estimation of a teacher by the group. The observance of the rules is important due to the expectations of the immediate environment.

Loyalty is needed towards group members. The rules of the game must be observed within the group, but the same rules no longer apply to those outside the group. Woe betide any outsider! Even higher levels of moral development can be identified in the 12 to 18 age group, but these are mostly found in circles of solidarity within the group. This higher level of moral reasoning, already experienced within the group, is less frequently used with respect to outsiders (also in case of adults). In case of poorly socialised, disadvantaged groups, this

step back takes place between lower levels. Egoistic, aggressive behaviour, breaking the rules and using morally objectionable methods against outsiders, persons defined as the enemy, is not only allowed, but even considered a heroic act. Cases of verbal and physical violence against teachers recently are becoming increasingly frequent in Hungary also. Teachers have less and less authority resulting from their status. Unfortunately, the community of teachers also appears less as an elite team certainly deserving recognition. Such recognition can be achieved by way of personal, individual performance. The confidence and recognition granted in advance is negligible.

A teacher or a group of teachers can easily become the enemy, and as such, a target. What can help avoid this is when the group respects the teacher and accepts him/her as an external member.

If the community prestige of the given teacher is low, and the values in his/her personality, behaviour and style are not discovered, the group will define him/her as an enemy. This hostile reaction will be strengthened if the teacher fails to make an effort for the fair handling of the interface of their relationship.

In the course of our research project we discovered that the estimation of teachers shows a correlation with the interpretation of the teacher's own role. For example, submission before one's pupils shows a fatal misunderstanding of the teacher's role, and the response of the pupils' group will include the minimising of their willingness to cooperate, showing contempt and playing harsh practical jokes.

The finding of Ryans in his research concerning teachers, namely that good teachers have a more positive opinion of their pupils, gains a new interpretation (Ryans, 1991). Indeed, pupils show their worse side toward bad teachers. Therefore, the opinion of these bad teachers, on the basis of their personal experiences, will understandably be worse than the opinion of those other teachers whose pupils consider these others good teachers, who will thus actually have better impressions about the same group of pupils.

5 How does Personality Disorder or Confusion about One's Role Appear?

We examined the responses of college students (N=73) concerning bad teachers in further categories. More than 90% of the cases could be defined as a personality disorder or confusion about the teacher's role. We were trying to find what patterns of behaviour this group shows.

In terms of the forms of their manifestation, most of them can be placed in three categories of behaviour, as follows:

1st Superior: this group of bad teachers was usually described with the adjectives authoritarian, scornful, aggressive and cynical.

2nd Unmotivated, burnt-out: indifferent, apathetic, tired, negligent, disinterested, ill-prepared.

3rd Inferior: indecisive, unable to maintain discipline, dumb, sensitive, allowing chaos in class, lacking authority, too obedient, quiet.

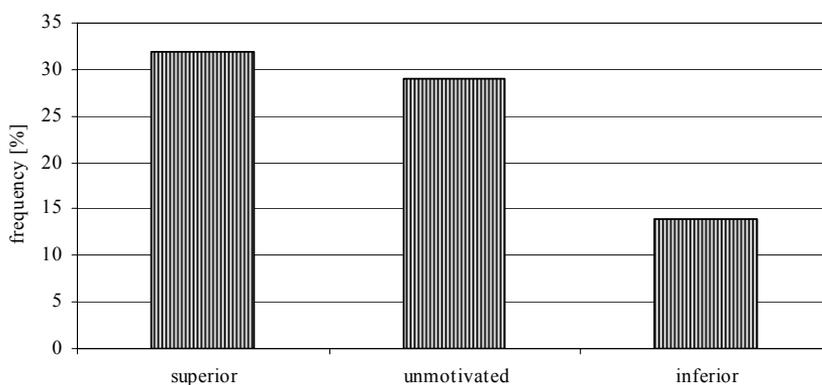


Figure 3

Forms of appearance of personality disorders or confusions about one's role

These data are revealing in terms of the relationships to the pupils as someone the teacher must work with together, the poor management of the relationship interface, as well as the lack of perception of the reality. All three of these make the healthy, realistic, efficient cooperation, concentrating at the tasks at hand, and higher-level intellectual work more difficult.

The teachers considered as bad by their pupils found (at least) three routes of escape instead of realistically evaluating and solving the problem. Thus, they withdrew from the realistic zone.

Teachers positioning themselves as superior to their pupils artificially increased the formal distance of authority, and blamed all failure on the pupils. Such teachers think they are always right, which means that they are invulnerable, and they want their pupils to become something completely different. “What a wise man seeks is in himself, what the fool seeks is in others” (Confucius).

Burnt-out, unmotivated teachers dull their senses and withdrew from participation in the events, and can thus have no real joy or major sorrow either. They just survive while exerting minimal energy. They are no longer able to really experience the conflicts, or they just do not care about the whole thing.

Teachers who subordinate themselves into an inferior position just accept and suffer the situation, and have very little power to influence it in any way. They do not even really understand their own predicament. If they do nothing, they believe, they can minimise the trouble.

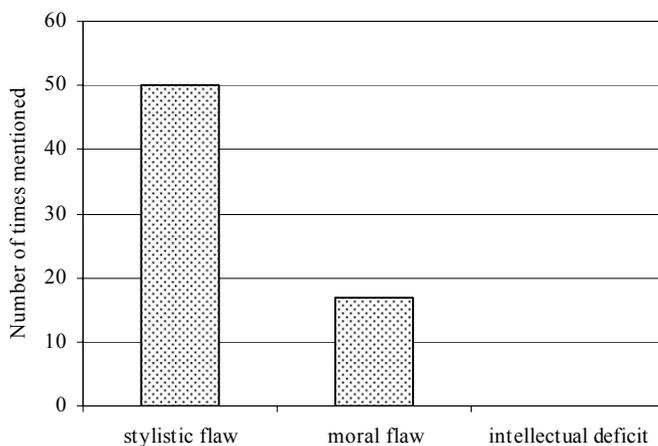


Figure 4
Types of flaws

Reversing the aphorism “the style is the man himself” we can say that the flaw in one’s style is the flaw in one’s person(ality). Bad style can indeed be revealing of internal disturbances and the strong lack of coherence.

Moral inadequacy (if indeed this is what we are dealing with, and it can be proved with respect to the given person) is unacceptable in case of teachers. Its development in the short term can only bring results on the surface. Real improvement can only be expected in case of a total change of one’s value system, the likelihood of which is very low in case of adults. It is usually only the very infrequent real cathartic events that can launch such changes, which are turns of fate and cannot be planned in advance.

It is surprising that intellectual/educational deficit was not found as the cause for the bad evaluation for a single teacher. In some cases, early cultural or socialisation deficit may be in the background of a teacher’s bad style. These are due to formal behavioural deficiencies and not to the given person’s confusion of values, although it may appear as the latter.

Bad teachers have therefore been found suitable for the job after at least two filters until the time when the negative experiences described above were caused in the course of their work with their pupils, which was the source of the poor opinions.

They have passed the filter of teacher training, which – as we know – only disqualifies someone in case of serious delinquencies. They have met the formal

expectations of pedagogical training, even if they only reached as far as one of the first stages of moral development in Kohlberg's system. [7] Under the pressure of external expectations, they have observed the rules of behaviour during the teaching practice. And for an immature personality power – even that very small power a teacher has – is like a drug.

The role of the second filter is played by the principals of the school who decide on hiring these teachers. In these situations, it is primarily the academic results and good manners that dominate, which prove that the applicant can learn, take exams and play roles; however, pupils also get to see a different side of the teacher in the classroom: the human being, the personality, the accepting or the rejecting partner.

This career offers a sense of success also to many people who in their own age group and among similarly trained co-workers would not succeed so well. The role of a dominant and clever person (assuming a superior position) is attractive to those wishing to compensate for their immaturity.

We do not want to offend with these words the colleagues suitable for a teaching career, who are talented or can at least perform at an average level. Without them, the majority of schools would have to be closed down. Their work is important. The teaching career is not only open for geniuses. The conditions are not ideal either, especially not in Central Europe. One with an average intellect can also be a good teacher, as the above opinions by pupils prove.

The analysis we provided applied to bad teachers, those who are deemed by their pupils as unsuitable for the job, have an imbalanced personality, are stuck in their situation and inadequately work together with the pupils, as well as to such formerly good teachers who have burnt out, people who cannot change their situation on their own or perhaps do not even want to. [3]

They are trapped in this situation fraught with conflicts, from which they can see no way out and can rarely find pleasure in their work. The situation is bad for these teachers and bad for their pupils as well.

In institutes of higher education (and also in some secondary schools) laws require that the teachers be evaluated on the basis of students' opinions. This can be a suitable tool for recognising bad teachers, especially if the evaluations are not just a formality.

The changing of the situation of bad teachers is in the real interest of all sides, yet such situations often remain hidden. After the recognition, the in-depth analysis of the situation and the planning of the method of assistance become possible with the involvement of the teacher's superior and a psychologist, always with the necessary discretion as appropriate in such personal matters. The resolution of minor difficulties of adequacy is possible, even desirable, in regular discussions of cases and in Balint groups.

Conclusions

All this paper is about the empirically identified characteristics of "bad" teachers. To be a "good" teacher, however, it is not enough not to have the mentioned characteristics of "bad" teachers. Those, who are not "bad" teachers, are not automatically "good" teachers. We have good reasons to believe that the lack of these disadvantageous characteristics represent only the necessary but not the sufficient conditions to be a "good" teacher. We have given certain answers to the question: "What makes a teacher bad?". This research can be considered only a starting point of an other research aiming at the other important related question: "What makes a teacher good?". We'll target this topic in our next paper.

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