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STUDENT LEARNING, CHILDHOOD & VOICES | RESEARCH ARTICLE

Authentic teachers: Student criteria perceiving authenticity of teachers

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Abstract: Authenticity is seen by many as a key for good learning and education. There is talk of authentic instruction, authentic learning, authentic problems, authentic assessment, authentic tools and authentic teachers. The problem is that while authenticity is an often-used adjective describing almost all aspects of teaching and learning, the concept itself is not very well researched. This qualitative study examines—based on data collected via interviews and focus groups—which criteria students in secondary education use when determining if their teachers are authentic. It yielded four criteria learners use: Expertise, Passion, Unicity and Distance.

Subjects: Teacher Education & Training; Secondary Education; Teacher Training; Teachers & Teacher Education; Teaching & Learning

Keywords: authenticity; teacher–student relationship; perception; secondary education

1. Introduction

Authenticity everywhere and for everything is “in” (Potter, 2010). Brands must create authentic experiences for consumers/users (Gilmore & Pine, 2007); musicians only survive if they are perceived as being true (Peterson, 1997), and even in political elections, being authentic is an important issue (Williams, Pillai, Deptula, & Lowe, 2012). In education, researchers stress the importance of authenticity (for an overview see, Kreber, Klampfleitner, McCune, Bayne, & Knottenbelt, 2007) for optimal learning, assessment and even teacher–student relationships. In teacher training

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PUBLIC INTEREST STATEMENT

Does a teacher need to be authentic? The concept of authenticity has been discussed for decades, but what it actually means to be authentic as a teacher seldom progresses past the realm of philosophy. To get a better grip on this concept, we asked students in secondary education what—in their eyes—an authentic teacher is. Based on their responses, we distilled four criteria. Teachers are perceived as authentic when they know what they are talking about and can translate subject matter to the students’ knowledge level (expertise). Second, authentic teachers are passionate about what they teach (passion). Third, authentic teachers give students the feeling that each student and each class is different (uniqueness). Finally, authentic teachers aren’t friends with their students but have an interest in them (distance). By describing these student perceptions, this study helps us to understand and build better relations between students and teachers.

programmes—heavily influenced by the ideas of Carl Rogers (1983)—the student is often advised to “just be yourself”. However, “just be yourself” can be one of the most complicated tasks you can give someone, particularly if they are a teacher or student teacher (Gallego, 2001). The question, thus, is: What does it mean to be “yourself”? This study addresses this problem by examining what being authentic means in the perception of students looking at their teacher. Authenticity in the eye of the beholder (Gulikers, Bastiaens, & Kirschner, 2004).

2. Background and research question

It is possible that a teacher is being “true to himself” (Trilling, 1974), but that her/his students do not perceive it as such. Is it possible to tell if someone is, indeed, being true? Can we look at someone and be able to determine whether that person is being truly authentic? Are there questions we could ask to determine this? The probable answer to all three questions is “No”. This article, therefore, has chosen to view authenticity as a black box, and instead look at and discuss what makes students perceive a teacher as being authentic or not (Larsson & Holmström, 2007). Its focus is on “revealing how things look from the point of view of the respondent” (Pratt, 1992, p. 204).

Research has shown that with respect to other teacher qualities that students perceive their teachers differently from how teachers perceive themselves. For example, a teacher might think of him/herself as being cooperative, but this does not mean that students also perceive the teacher this way (Van Petegem, 2008). Important here is to note that one’s perceptions about something are highly related to one’s conceptions of that thing (Goldstone & Barsalou, 1998). To stick to Van Petegem’s example of cooperativeness: a teacher’s perceived cooperativeness will be influenced by how the student sees or understands (i.e. conceives) the concept of cooperativeness. If a student sees cooperativeness as “giving the correct answer if ...”, then a teacher who does not give the correct answer but rather tries to help the student find the correct answer will not be perceived cooperative. If cooperativeness is conceived as “allowing the deadline for a task to be postponed if ...”, then a teacher who does not postpone a deadline will not be perceived as cooperative.

In this vein, there could/should be a similar relationship between authenticity and perceived authenticity, where perceived authenticity is based on the student’s conception of what authenticity is.

A first question is: What is the basis of this perception? Kreber et al. (2007), who carried out an extensive review of literature on conceptions of authenticity in education, found that the majority of the literature focused on authenticity from a philosophical perspective and/or on the authenticity of teaching personae. They also found that there is a lack of empirical evidence on how students perceive authenticity (Kreber et al., 2007). This study attempts to fill this gap.

This study distinguishes itself from research describing what a “good teacher” is or should be; a question raised, for example, by Harden and Crosby (2000), Korthagen (2004) and Moore (2004). It also is not about how authentic a teacher should be as or how an authentic teacher should act as Kreber et al. (2007) described in their review. Starting from the premise that authenticity is important for the relation between students and teachers (Rodgers & Raider-Roth, 2006), knowing how the authenticity is perceived is considered to be important.

To summarise, taking into account:

- authenticity as a black box vs. perceived authenticity,
- conceptions of authenticity in the minds of philosophers vs. authenticity in the minds of students,
- what a good teacher is vs. authenticity that can be both positive or negative, this study investigates the possible criteria students use to assess teachers as being authentic.

3. Methodology

This study focuses on understanding rather than predicting. To this end, a grounded theory approach was chosen as most appropriate, since there has been little empirical-based theory developed here (Cranton & Carusetta, 2004; Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Ragin, 1994).

What this study does is related to Marton's (1986) method of *phenomenography*. He describes phenomenography as a research method with a goal of

... mapping the qualitative different ways in which people experience, conceptualise, perceive, and understand various aspects of, and phenomena in, the world around them ... (p. 31) ... (in order to) describe relations between the individual and various aspects of the world around them, regardless of whether those relationships are manifested in the forms of immediate experience, conceptual thought, or physical behaviour. (ibid, pp. 41–42)

Marton and colleagues (e.g. Åkerlind, 2005) developed this method as they were dissatisfied with both the less pragmatic phenomenological strand of educational thinking and the more psychological approach of educational research. This focus on the perceived authenticity coincides with this strong emphasis on the pragmatic.

Cope (2004) states that phenomenographic researchers need to provide a full and open account of their methods. To this end, what follows is an overview of the different research steps.

Step 1: Semi-structured interviews

As first step in the data collection, semi-structured interviews were carried out. Hancock (1998) states that semi-structured interviews

... involve a series of open ended questions based on the topic areas the researcher wants to cover. The open ended nature of the question defines the topic under investigation but provides opportunities for both interviewer and interviewee to discuss some topics in more detail. If the interviewee has difficulty answering a question or provides only a brief response, the interviewer can use cues or prompts to encourage the interviewee to consider the question further. In a semi-structured interview the interviewer also has the freedom to probe the interviewee to elaborate on the original response or to follow a line of inquiry introduced by the interviewee. (p. 9)

Semi-structured interviews allowed for a focus on specific topics, but left discussion open for more elaboration. The data collection chose not to begin the interviews with a focus on “authenticity” so as to give respondents the opportunity to say it was not important. Such indirect questioning is often employed in social sciences to reduce social desirability bias (Fisher, 1993). Therefore, the interview began by quoting research by Gennip and Vrieze (2008) who found that “teachers in secondary education see topical knowledge, authenticity and classroom management as defining characteristics of a good teacher” (p. XX). The respondents were asked if they concurred with this statement and which of the three was the most important for them and why.

The interviewees ($N = 42$) were students studying at the teacher-training department of Arteveldehogeschool University College in Belgium. The interviewees ($N = 42$) were students in different schools across Flanders, the Dutch-speaking part of Belgium. Each interviewer, thus, interviewed one respondent. Using teacher training, students here had both a practical and a methodological motive, namely keeping the power differences between interviewer and interviewee as small as possible (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2013). The assumption was that students would talk more freely to someone who was young (i.e. closer to their own age and experience) rather than to someone who was a teacher. A quality check of the interviews was performed by both of the researchers who would do the analysis, checking that questions asked by the interviewer were not leading. Two interviews were omitted because the reliability of the interview could not be guaranteed as leading questions were used. Cohen et al. (2013) describes a leading question as “one which

makes assumptions about interviewees or ‘puts words into their mouths’, i.e. where the question influences the answer perhaps illegitimately” (p. 205).

A first version of the interview scheme was given to a sounding board composed of methodologists and social researchers. This led to its modification. Then, before the actual interviews, the interview scheme was tested during a six-hour training session that all interviewers attended. The six hours consisted of two hours of theoretical background on taking interviews, two hours of practice with the scheme that was recorded both to check the scheme and to give personal feedback to the interviewers, and two hours of theoretical background on the concept of authenticity.

During the interview training it appeared that the word “authenticity” was less well known than expected, hinting this could also be an issue with the interviewees. Therefore, the interview scheme was altered: when a respondent did not comprehend the word authenticity, “being real”¹ would be used as a synonym.

In the interviews, students were asked for the elements which would make them perceive a teacher as being authentic or fake, inside a formal learning context (see Addendum 2).

Interviewees were picked randomly, though account was taken of differences between gender and grade at school. Each interviewer had to choose one student to interview. The only limitations were to the numbers of students from the same sex, age or grade. The purpose was to maximise the variance in respondents’ understandings of authenticity.

The interviews were conducted in April 2010 and lasted 45–60 min. All interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed by a third party. All data, both transcripts and audio, are available on request (Table 1).

In total there were interviews with 19 males and 21 females. Thirteen respondents were in their 4th year (this compares with 10th grade in the US, age 15–16), 13 in their 5th year (11th grade in the US, age 16–17) and 14 in their 6th year (12th grade in the US, age 17–18).

Flanders does not have a comprehensive education system. Instead, students can opt to take classes in different forms. Fifteen respondents took classes in General Secondary Education, a broad general education as preparation for tertiary education. Nineteen respondents took classes in Technical Secondary Education, lessons which have a less theoretical (i.e. a more technical and practical) approach. Six respondents took classes in Vocational Secondary Education, a very practical and very job-specific form of education.

Step 2: First round of analysis

All interviews were analysed by two researchers working separately, but who met regularly to discuss their findings. NVivo® 8 and 10 were used. For the analyses, coding was done in an inductive manner. A first evaluation of the findings was made after analysing 26 interviews and comparing the analyses between the two researchers. Both researchers compared the codes given to respondents’ statements so as to group them into categories. This was repeated after the analyses of all 40 interviews.

Table 1. Overview of the respondents with respect to gender, grade and school type

Year	General secondary education (GSE)		Technical secondary education (TSE)		Vocational secondary education (VSE)	
	M	F	M	F	M	F
4	2	3	3	5		
5	2	2	2	1	4	2
6	1	5	5	3		

During the initial analysis, the focus was on establishing categories to explore criteria students use in perceiving authenticity. The principal researcher, one author of this article, knew the background of this research; the other did not. In this way, the second researcher could not be influenced by knowledge of the topic, and thus could really build a theory from the ground up. Based on these two analysis rounds, a first draft came to four criteria. As part of the communicative validity check, this was checked using two focus groups (Step 3).

Step 3: Focus groups

When working from a grounded theory perspective, there is often a combination of semi-structured interviews and group interviews (Lambert & Loisel, 2008). Lambert and Loisel give three reasons for doing so:

- (1) pragmatic reasons, such as not being able to bring everybody together;
- (2) the need to compare and contrast participants' perspectives (parallel use); and
- (3) striving towards data completeness and/or confirmation (integrated use).

When combining semi-structured interviews and group interviews for confirmation, one can speak of soft triangulation (Sandelowski, 1995; Turner & Turner, 2009): "the use of two or more methods of data collection in the study of some aspect of human behaviour" (Cohen et al., 2013, p. 195).

The initial findings were tested in two focus groups (2 × 7 students of 17 and 18 years old, all in their 6th year who were not in the interview population). Audio recordings were made of the interviews. The results of the group interviews were used to inspire further data analysis, using the data from the first round as lead data.

Step 4: Second round of data analyses

A theory should demonstrate precision and universality and set the grounds for its own falsification and verification (Popper, 1968, cited in Cohen et al., 2013). As the goal is the construction of a theory, falsification and internal consistency are of utmost importance. This was the focus of the second data analysis round. Based on the new data and insights from the focus groups, both researchers returned to the original data to fine-tune the original analysis. The different elements from the theory were checked (e.g. whether students from vocational training thought topical knowledge less important than students from other levels of education).

Step 5: Bring in the experts

A third round of data collection was added to augment the validity of the existing analysis and fine-tune the insights gained by checking the results with three experts. These experts are researchers who examine authenticity and/or youth in domains other than education:

- Researcher A studies the perception of authenticity by youth in marketing in a commercial environment (InSites research), but has also a distinct scientific research track record.
- Researcher B studies the concept of authentic leadership in organisations, finished his PhD on this topic and is now a professor in Canada researching the influence of authentic leadership in both organisations and educational contexts.
- Researcher C studies how youth perceive themselves and their peers as real or fake, in an organisation that supports non-formal youth organisations. He has a strong emphasis on action research.

The three received an extensive report on the findings including respondents' quotes. The separate interviews with all three, all performed by the principal researcher, lasted on average one hour and the audio was recorded. The researchers were specifically asked to compare the insights from

this research with their own empirical research as well as with their knowledge of the literature on (perceived) authenticity, and to check the findings for inconsistencies.

Step 6: Finalising the analysis

Based on the input by the three expert interviews, the analysis was finalised. The experts confirmed the findings and also gave new insights on uniqueness and authority that were included in further analysis.

4. Validity and reliability

Validity and reliability are difficult to achieve in qualitative research, as such research is intersubjective (Åkerlind, 2005). Kvale (1996) describes two types of validity checks in phenomenography: communicative and pragmatic. To check for *communicative validity*, the researchers need to communicate their findings to test the persuasive powers of their arguments, both in the scientific community and with members of the population being researched, the original interviewees or the prospective audience of the research results. Most phenomenographic researchers will not check up with the original interviewees because the researchers' interpretations are based on a collective, rather than an individual interview (Åkerlind, 2005). The interpretation of the categorisation of an individual interview cannot be understood to its full extent without a sense of the group of interviews as a whole. A second reason is that the ontological assumptions underlying the approach indicate that the experience of an individual is coloured by the context, and thus can alter through time and space (Åkerlind, 2005). The *pragmatic validity* check corresponds with the extent to which the results are seen as useful and/or meaningful to the intended audience (Kvale, 1996; Uljens, 1996). In the six steps in the present research, this was not included.

In this study, the communicative validity check was carried out by presenting initial results to two focus groups of students of the same age as those in the original data collection (Step 3). The authors also discussed their findings with three experts on authenticity (Step 5) as a form of establishing inter-judge communicability (Cope, 2004).

In addition, Kvale (1996) describes two forms of reliability checks on the influence of the researcher's perspective on the research outcomes:

- (1) Coder reliability check, where two researchers independently code all or a sample of the interview transcripts and compare categorisations; and
- (2) Dialogic reliability check, where agreement between researchers is reached through discussion and mutual critique of the data and of each researcher's interpretive hypotheses (Åkerlind, 2005, p. 331).

Coder reliability was achieved by having two researchers working independently to minimise the influence of predetermined viewpoints and maintain the open mind essential for a grounded theory approach. After both researchers made a first draft of possible categorisations, they sat together and switched to a dialogic reliability check.

5. Analyses

The analysis focussed first on defining categories of statements that could be seen as criteria used by students when perceiving a teacher as being authentic or no after which these were checked with the focus groups and the expert panel. The four criteria are: expertise, passion, unicity and distance.

5.1. Authenticity is expertise

The first criterion used for determining if a teacher is authentic is *expertise*: respondents state that they expect to learn something in class and the teacher is the expert that brings that about. Expertise is related to "topical knowledge" which was part of the opening statement in the interviews. It was

rated highly by the majority of the respondents (mentioned in 32 of the 40 interviews). To check whether Gennip and Vrieze's (2008) three characteristics influenced the findings, their statement was omitted when working with the focus groups. Though omitted they also found expertise crucial.

According to the respondents:

To me, school is a place to learn, and teachers have to fulfil this need. (4TSE16V)²

Because the point of us being there is to learn something from the person teaching us. The lessons might be pleasant and even fun, but that is not the most important thing. (6GSE18F)

I think, if the lesson interests you and you want to ask additional questions, then it's important that the teacher can supply further background and peripheral information. (6GSE17M)

Four respondents indicated that expertise also implies that the teacher can explain the subject matter clearly and intelligently, and ensures the time needed to master it.

There was a teacher who would give us a test out of the blue or grammar exercises because there wasn't enough time. I thought: 'I'm not studying it anymore.' In the end I didn't even enjoy the subject. (5GSE16M)

He went to great lengths to explain things and if you didn't understand then he'd explain it again and again; it's only expertise if it's also explained in different ways. (6TSE18F)

Some see expertise as a way of caring about students and showing involvement with the class. This also means many of the respondents felt that a teacher attempts to involve them/rouse their interest/motivate them for the subject matter, and together with them strive to get a good result. Students expect a teacher to help them assimilate the subject matter.

Not really the way they taught but more the way they cared about us, ... They wanted us to get good marks, wanted us to get our diploma because they know how important that is and if you have a problem then they always make that extra effort to help you, that's for sure ... (6TSE18F)

If you don't understand something that is important to what the lesson's about, the teacher must go over it again and be patient. (5VSE16F)

The importance of expertise as basis for authenticity is so omnipresent that it was present in all years and levels of education, as well as between both sexes.

5.2. Authenticity is passion

However, to be perceived as authentic, simply being a master of the content seems not to be enough. A second important criterion is passion and enthusiasm for the subject area. Students must feel that a teacher is involved with her/his subject and with the students.

If he lives for his subject ... if you see that he's put a lot of work into his subject and tries to teach it in a nice and fun way. And yeah ... that he sees that we're interested and that we're making an effort too. (5GSE16F)

Perhaps also that he doesn't just dash off the subject matter, that he himself is really interested in the subject, that he enjoys teaching it. (4TSE16F)

Students immediately see if teachers invest time in their chosen subject and appreciate this investment. It is all about, as it were, how the teacher takes the interests and the world of the students

into account. It is striking how little the students are interested in teaching methods or other pedagogic principles. It is mainly mentioned if it serves a purpose, if it can make a lesson more pleasant or if it can lead to the contents being better understood.

Passion as criterion also means that students are motivated by teachers who invest the time and effort in preparing lessons, who looks for creative ways and methods to bring across the subject matter, and who sees to it that students hold their attention.

Yes, I realise that teachers have to basically follow the syllabus, but on the other hand I think they should be free in their choice of themes.

If you show some creativity there, you can really gain the students' interest and attention. (5GSE16M)

In this way, it is important how the teacher goes about illustrating the core of the lesson. Elements associated with the wider student environment can be an extra incentive or motivation. What is crucial here is assessing the added value of illustrating the contents of the lesson, so it goes beyond simply "livening up the lesson".

Interviewer: If you had to choose one of these important concepts, which one comes to mind?

Interviewee: I think I'd go for authenticity. That's something you get from a first impression. When a teacher starts their first class with you by telling you everything you're not allowed to do, then you know immediately that they won't be a nice teacher. On the other hand, if the teacher begins by telling you: I intend to teach you this and that this year and in such and such a way, and I hope that you'll all enjoy it, that's totally different. It makes you want to learn, to be attentive and look forward to the lessons and you view the teacher in a totally different light.

Interviewer: That's what you term authenticity in a teacher?

Interviewee: Yes, the way a teacher teaches, the effort they put in to interest and teach something to us. (6GSE18F)

One respondent compares a teacher to a theatre director or football coach:

I find this one much more authentic because she really wants to do something. For instance, if you take football, the coach is simply so passionate about it that he's going to do everything he can to see that you win. That's great to know that they're never going to give up. In the theatre that's part and parcel of theatre life. It's not from necessity that people enter the theatre, just to have a job ... I think it's great to be among people like that. (4GSE15M)

5.3. Authenticity is unicity

The third criterion is a direct result of passion as students see it. Respondents indicate that every lesson should have its own special character (i.e. be unique), preferably where the lesson is more thorough or departs from a standard lesson. This unicity leans close to expertise, and while expertise is needed, it is all about the fact that the teacher does not feel restrained by the curriculum.

In the lessons we had from him we once read a text in the Dutch lesson and suddenly he sees a word and starts to talk about that word. He would even spend the rest of the lesson on something like that, which made the lessons really interesting. He didn't follow the syllabus and yet he taught us a lot more through the way he taught. It went from Shakespeare to ... (4GSE15M)

Perhaps, uh, in the marketing lesson discussing economy, the teacher would not only discuss the subject matter but also things from his own experience, what he knows, things that have a lot to do with it but that in fact aren't directly linked to the subject matter. (4TSE15F)

Subject matter that includes examples from (one's daily) life, or where the teacher develops a theme and brings it to life, analyses it step by step with the students, is according to various students, one way of holding their attention.

Yeah, for instance our physics teacher sometimes brings things to class. For instance, he brought along a guitar to show how one is made. (4TSE16F)

What differentiates one teacher from another is his own approach, a different approach for each class, and he adapts himself a little to us, and that he knows what he can do and knows he feels to be important. (6TSE18F)

Students clearly know what they want when it comes down to approach, and soon know whether teachers are unable to convey their passion for the subject.

I once had a teacher that stuck doggedly to his course books. He'd even written down jokes in the margins and when he came across them he always read them out loud. He always told the same jokes. Every class had exactly the same lesson from him which was incredibly boring. (4ASI15M)

Students state that a teacher has to be her/himself, something strongly resembling the basic notion of being "true to the self", but also with a nuance of unicity. Authenticity is translated by respondents as putting your "own personal stamp" on the teacher role: maintaining one's own personality, having one's own way of interacting with the students, one's own way of "reacting" to situations and people, holding to one's own viewpoints and behaving consistently (both in and out of school).

Someone who has their own way of interacting with the students. And not "ah, that teacher handles them that way so I'll do it the same way". That the teacher really thinks about what's the most appropriate way to interact with students. And what should he do to get the best results. Then students follow his lesson with pleasure. (5VSE17M)

Everyone is so different which is what's so great about it, because each has their own specialities. They're so eager and all have other interests. (4TSE17M)

5.4. Authenticity is not too near and not too far (distance)

The final category or criterion—distance—is conceptually different from the previous three. It is less about the teacher her/himself and more about the relationship between teachers and students, and its influence on being perceived as being authentic or not.

Various respondents appreciated the use of autobiographical elements, indicating that it strengthens mutual trust. This certainly applies to teachers who are present for long periods of a student's time at school.

Yes, my history teacher talks a lot about his own life. He enjoys doing this, and this makes the lesson a lot nicer for us since we also get to know the teacher better. (6GSE18F)

Quite right ... I think it was last year when I was in the fifth year. It was Mr. V. S., the information science teacher who suddenly started to talk about his family. His wife had just had a baby and I thought it was great that he wanted to share it with us. (6GSE17M)

On the other hand, many respondents noted a clear defining line in the relationship between teacher and students and in the use of autobiographical elements.

I think that in certain ways it can be part of the class, but they shouldn't talk about relationships and things like that in class and also not make use things they know against a particular student ... That's not right. (6GSE18F)

Thus, according to several of the respondents, a teacher should not be "over social" or become too personal. Respondents point to duality between distance and nearness.

When there was something wrong he comes over to you but still kept his distance to an extent. (4GSE15F)

The teachers that are somewhat more easy-going yet know their limits. But still talk to you and the class. (4GSE15F)

Moreover, some areas of a student's social life (e.g. social network sites) are seen as out of bounds for teachers.

Interviewee: Yes, teachers should spend a little more time in getting to know their students, that they know what makes each student tick ... I think they should be aware of that.

Interviewer: Where do you think the limit lies regarding getting to know students better? For instance, Facebook.

Interviewee: No, Facebook and those things don't belong here, but if there are problems at school that they can be discussed after school. (5VSE17M)

This unspoken line between distance and nearness in the relationship between teacher and student is quite clear for the respondents. A few respondents indicate it is the openness that teachers show, which they appreciate, both inside and outside the school gates.

Teachers have to act more openly towards us and open up to us. They could become closer to us. Especially because you can draw a line between: now we're having a lesson and this person is in a position of authority over us, and then later, outside the class, he's the same as anyone else. (6GSE18F)

A positive relationship between teacher and student requires (limited) "active" involvement from the teacher. Teachers have to have "antennae" to pick up things that are part of their students' lives; repressed tension that might be present, etc. According to many respondents, being involved with students also means that teachers make certain topics a point of discussion in the class, as well as with individual students. This can concern class conflicts, problems at home, well-being problems, etc.

As regards interacting with the class, she's very easy-going, and if something's wrong she'll quickly start talking about the problem. But there are other teachers who make little effort in that area. (5VSE17M)

If there's a problem, whoever's in charge has to listen and offer help even if what's wrong has nothing to do with the lesson ... (5VSE16F)

According to some respondents, active involvement more likely manifests itself during informal moments such as breaks, changing classes, school trips. That is when teachers ask about home life, how they are feeling, their hobbies, etc. These contact moments are often brief and casual, though greatly appreciated.

For me, the perfect teacher is my Dutch teacher. I'm a little bit her favourite. Recently we went to Paris on a school trip and when we were on the metro my teacher asked me, "[Name of the student] how's life with you?" I think it's great that she treats her students like that and has contact with them. (4TSE16F)

For instance, in our first year at secondary school we had a religious instruction teacher with whom you could also have a chat outside of class. The same with birthdays. When you went to the next year, he still remembered your birthday and knew who you were and sometimes took you aside for a chat. That's nice. (4TSE16F)

Finally, a few respondents indicated that their syllabus and the required subject matter should not be pushed into second place through the building up of a relationship based on mutual trust between the teacher and his/her students. A number of students indicated that this balance has to be closely monitored by the teacher.

6. Discussion

This study discerned four criteria that students use in their perceptions of a teacher's authenticity. In the following, they are discussed here in light of existing literature.

6.1. Expertise

When discussing the topical knowledge of teachers, some may be surprised that there is no clear linear relation between expertise and being a great teacher (Hattie, 2003, 2012). One can know a lot about a certain topic, without being seen as a great teacher in the field. Still our respondents put an important focus on expertise, but with an important twist. From the analysis it was apparent that students have clear conceptions about teaching and teacher expertise as basis for authenticity:

- Students expect to learn something in school.
- A teacher is someone who understands and knows how to explain subject matter.
- And for some, a teacher needs to care.

It is apparent here that students are not asking for the authority of the expert in a certain topical domain, but for the authority of the expert *teacher* in a certain domain.

Hattie and Jaeger (1998), Hattie (2003, 2012), Hattie and Clinton (2008) distinguish between an expert teacher and an experienced teacher. This distinction is very close to what the respondents seem to mean with the importance of topical knowledge. Instead of a teacher merely with years of experience, an expert teacher has the ability to translate the subject in a way students understand and can learn:

Expert teachers have high levels of knowledge and understanding of the subject they teach, can guide learning to desirable surface and deep outcomes, can successfully monitor learning and provide feedback that assists students to progress, can attend to the more attitudinal attributes of learning (especially developing self-efficacy and mastery motivation), and can provide defensible evidence of positive impacts of the teaching on student learning. (Hattie, 2012, p. 24)

When discussing expertise in the perception of authenticity, one could say that the teacher needs to be an expert in the eyes of the students and (s)he shows this by translating the to-be-learnt content to the level of the learner.

6.2. Passion

Carbonneau, Vallerand, Fernet, and Guay (2008), based on Deci and Ryan (2000), distinguish two types of passion: *harmonious* passion and *obsessive* passion. In the former, the activity of teaching is internalised by one's identity and the activity of learning is freely accepted as important. In the latter, teaching might be the only activity that allows the teacher to maintain a sense of self-worth (Carbonneau et al.).

This study shows that students expect harmonious passion from their "authentic" teachers, the kind of passion that leads to effective learning (Day, 2004; Hattie, 2009; Steele, 2009). Analysing the

concept of passion, Day states that passion creates energy, determination, conviction, commitment and obsession in people (Day, 2004, 2007). *Commitment* seems key in what our respondents describe as passion with respect to perceiving authenticity. This kind of passion helps explain why students sometimes can become passionate about a lesson while the topic itself was not of interest to them before the lesson. A harmonious passionate teacher can have a “contagious” effect on the pupils. This is very different than more “Rousseau-based” views on education that put an emphasis on the passions of the pupils to be followed and supported by their teachers (De Bruyckere, Struyf, & Kavadias, 2015).

6.3. Unicity

The unicity found in this study is closely related to the idea that “no two people are the same”. While one could think this unicity would be all about the teacher being true to her/himself (cfr Trilling, 1974), the unicity described by the respondents is more egocentric. The students report that if every student is different, every class group is different and so every teacher should act differently. This should not be confused with the concept of differentiation or to present forms of personalisation. The students often stated that an authentic teacher needs to break out of the harness of the curriculum to give students and learners a unique and relevant experience. Again this gives a strong focus on a teacher who takes the lead in the education process, but not as a contradiction of not being student-centred. It is taking the lead to put the student in the centre.

6.4. Distance

The research here delivers an important insight in the relationship between students and teachers in that the findings do not support Rawlings’ theory (2000) that students want their teachers to be a friend. While they prefer teachers who are non-directive, empathetic and warm (Cornelius-White, 2007), the respondents in this research wanted a one-way relationship. While it is important that teachers show an interest in them, they themselves are less interested in the personal lives of their teachers. They want to maintain a distance. And if this distance is bridged, it should occur in informal moments both between classes and during extra-curricular activities.

Distance as described here is in line with empirical findings about interpersonal relationships between teachers and students. Davis (2003) describes how authority and care are important to students; two elements also present in the expectations here when they describe the relation as distant. The expectations voiced here for the teacher to be in control of the learning process is similar to research that describes how a combination of *dominance* and *cooperation* is perceived as what students expect from a “good” teacher (Wubbels, Brekelmans, den Brok, & van Tartwijk, 2006; Wubbels, Brekelmans, & Hooymayers, 1993). Dominance and cooperation are two positions from a model developed by Créton and Wubbels (1984) based on Leary (1957) with two axes Influence (Dominance–Submission) and Proximity (Opposition–Cooperation) (Wubbels & Brekelmans, 2005).

Chiu and Tulley (1997) found that students prefer a *confronting - contracting approach* which is grounded in social and developmental psychological theories (cfr behaviourism and social learning theory). This approach considers the role of the teacher to closely interact continually, so (s)he can arrive at solutions for behaviour problems together with students. This theory has a strong emphasis on participation and joint decision-making (Chiu & Tulley, 1997). The expectation of students of an authentic teacher is to be someone who takes into account their needs and feelings, but does make the decisions. It is in line with the findings of Brekelmans, Wubbels, and Creton (1989) who described that students prefer teachers who give them space and clear instructions.

7. Limitations to this study and suggestions for further research

A first limitation to this study is that qualitative research offers no possibilities to generalise (Cohen et al., 2013). Apart from this, there are other limitations to this study.

The educational experiences of the respondents have all been in the education system of Flanders and were limited to specific age groups. The Flemish education system differs from many others by

not being comprehensive. The results are also, at least, culturally coloured, as authenticity in teaching can have different meanings in different cultures (Lin, 2006).

Finally, because the research was qualitative, explicit weight cannot be given to each of the different criteria nor to whether or how the criteria interact.

These limitations form the basis for further research. First, it would be interesting to see whether younger students use the same criteria. Second, more quantitative research would help in determining the relative weights of the factors and whether there are other factors that influence priorities in these criteria. Naturally, as this was carried out in a specific country/culture, comparative studies across different countries are also advisable.

In conclusion, an interesting yet seldom noted result found in this research, is the importance given by the students to informal moments. It is at these moments when teachers get the chance to show their active involvement in the student. These contact moments during breaks and class changes as well as on school trips, though often brief and casual, are greatly appreciated by the students and seem to impact formal teaching moments and seem to have a key influence on the atmosphere. Further research is needed on the effect of these informal moments in relation to classroom management. Based on these findings, we also expect that the distinction between formal and informal settings can have an impact on how the authenticity of a teacher can be perceived. This is also a suggestion for further research.

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Notes

1. In Dutch these are the synonyms “echtheid” (authenticity) or “echt zijn” (being real).
2. After every quote is a code describing the respondent, the first digit refers to the grade, GSE-TSE-VSE refers to the type of education (i.e. the track), the next two digits refer to the age and the last character refers to the gender. 4TSE16V thus refers to a 16 year old girl from the 4th grade of the TSE-track.

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