

Student Perception of Teachers' Pets and Class Victims*

Wilfred B. W. Martin

memorial university of newfoundland

Using the concepts of "identity" and "situational identity" as developed in symbolic interactionism, this article focuses on student-perceived consequences of pets victims phenomena in the high school setting. The consequences for self-defined pets include experiencing the ridicule of one's peers, and greater pressure from teachers than normal concerning academic performance and classroom demeanour. The consequences for class victims are seen in marking and disciplining processes, in the development of a dislike for teachers, in antipathy among students, and in students' empathizing with those apparently victimized by teachers' actions. The complexities of pets victims phenomena challenge researchers and teachers alike to use diverse theoretical orientations and research techniques in order to understand teacher student interactions.

A l'aide des concepts d'"identité" et "d'identité situationnelle" définis dans le contexte de l'interactionnisme symbolique, cet article étudie comment les élèves du secondaire perçoivent les conséquences du phénomène des chouchous et des souffre-douleur des professeurs. Ceux qui se perçoivent eux-mêmes comme des chouchous rapportent être l'objet des moqueries de leurs pairs et être soumis davantage que les autres élèves à des exigences élevées de la part des professeurs, au plan des résultats académiques et du comportement en classe. Pour ce qui est des souffre-douleur, les étudiants considèrent que les conséquences de ce phénomène apparaissent au niveau du processus de notation et d'application de la discipline, et impliquent des sentiments d'antipathie à l'égard du professeur et entre les étudiants, de même qu'une empathie, qui peut se développer à l'égard des élèves que leurs camarades perçoivent comme victimisés par le comportement d'un professeur. La complexité du phénomène des chouchous et des souffre-douleur constitue un défi pour les chercheurs comme pour les professeurs et exige que différentes orientations théoriques et techniques de recherche soient utilisées pour mieux comprendre les interactions professeur-élève.

Social psychological studies associated with interactive analysis have made important contributions to our understanding of the complexities in teacher-student interactions. For example, Brophy and Good (1974) draw on findings from their own and others' research to isolate group and student differences that affect teachers. Other researchers have continued to identify the complexities of these interactions by investigating student characteristics and behaviour related to the expectations and attitudes of teachers (e.g., Bognar, 1983). Working from different theoretical frameworks and using methodological assumptions and research techniques that differ from more traditional social-psychological research on teacher-student interactions, a body of sociologically oriented

* The author wishes to thank the Social Science and Humanities Research Council of Canada for financial support of the research on which this paper is based.

research on classroom life is being accumulated to complement the traditional educational research in this area. These sociological studies of the processes of interaction in the classroom include, for example, the ethnomethodological studies of Mehan (1979) and Novak (1975), and the symbolic interaction research of Woods (1979), Stebbins (1974; 1975) and Martin (1976). Recent research on pupil strategies (Woods, 1980a) and teacher strategies (Woods, 1980b) also illustrate the need for closer analysis of interaction processes in the school. The identities of the actors in the classroom as they are developed, changed, and maintained are integral parts of these interaction processes.

From the student perspective of schooling, two of the more salient student identities in this setting are *teachers' pets* and *class victims*. This article will focus on students' perceptions of the consequences of the favouring mistreating processes which may have contributed to the creation of these identities in the first place. To provide a frame of reference for the present analysis of teachers' pets and class victims, it is necessary to give a brief overview of the concept of *identity* with particular reference to the classroom.

IDENTITIES IN THE CLASSROOM

The term "identity" is generally used in sociology to refer to a "person's biographical sense of relationship to the others with whom he or she has been and is customarily associated" (Hewitt, 1976: 80). In other words, it is the cumulative sense of one's place relative to others. More explicitly, a student, for example, develops a sense of his or her identity relative to that of the teacher in general. The idea of "situated identity" has been introduced into the literature to account for one's sense of position in a particular situation. For example, during specific instruction in an academic subject like mathematics or social studies, or during extra-curricular activities, a student develops a sense of his or her position relative to others (teachers and students) in these situations. In other words, the issues of identity and situated identity and the concomitant questions of "who am I" in terms of overall position and of others in specific teaching-learning situations are central to the processes of self and self-development as studied from the sociological orientation of symbolic interactionism.¹ The notion of situated identities as associated with the student's social role or position has potential for analysing classroom interaction.

On the surface, the classroom appears to be a relatively simple structure involving two well-defined social roles: teacher and student. Teachers, however, must play such roles as judge, resource person, helper, friend and confidante, referee, detective, ego-supporter, and group leader (Hoyle, 1969: 9-60). Similarly, the myth of the singularity of the student role is soon dispelled when one attempts to isolate the "variety of slots"

which teachers have for students "of varying age, sex, intelligence and personality" (Calvert, 1975: 77–86). While some of these slots (or social identities) are defined by the formal organization of the school, others are created, developed, and changed, and are continually evolving in the classroom. For example, one Canadian study illustrates the categorization of students according to the teacher-perceived degree of negotiability in relation to particular groups of students. In other words, students are categorized as non-negotiable, intermittently negotiable, or continuously negotiable (Martin, 1976: 35–45, *passim*). An American research project dealing with black elementary school children reports on student characteristics and related interaction processes in teachers' definitions of pets, troublemakers, and nobodies in the school (Gouldner, 1978). It has also been observed that the definition of specific students as class clown, class bully, swot, or grind may become important for the social organization of certain classrooms (Calvert, 1975: 92–6).

While certain students become defined as teachers' pets, they, and others, may be seen as victims of classroom life. Two important aspects of the situated identities of pets and victims as related to high school students must be noted here. One is the fact that even though the categories of pets and victims may be a relatively stable part of classroom culture, the students in these categories may vary from time to time. The fact that certain students are categorized, that is given one social identity, in one way and others in another is partly a result of the interaction strategies employed by each of the combatants in this setting. Another aspect of the classroom pets victims phenomena centres on who defines a student as pet, victim, or both.

DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS

Data on which the present study are based are taken from student responses to an open ended question which was the last item on a survey questionnaire:

Obviously, this questionnaire covers only a small part of your experiences in the school. Please outline other aspects of your experiences in the school which concern you. Feel free to add any views you might have concerning your school, your teachers, your textbooks, and the way you are expected to study.

The questionnaire was administered to 7,948 students in Grades 9, 10 and 11 from 55 schools selected from 24 school boards in Newfoundland and Labrador.² It covers a wide range of topics including student council, school prefects, school rules, disciplinary procedures, and participation in extra-curricular activities. The questionnaire makes no reference to teachers' pets or to class victims as such. However, one part of the questionnaire suggests that teachers vary in their expectations of students and in the way they behave toward students, and then asks students to

indicate how often teachers do things like "threaten to punish you if you do not do as you are instructed to do," "give students too much freedom," and "do things that help create conflict and strife between teachers and students." Another part of the questionnaire asks students to agree or disagree with specific statements which also might be related to teacher pets. These statements include the following: "the punishments which teachers give in this school are usually fair," "I am concerned about my teachers' attitudes toward me," and "I want all my teachers to like me." One can only speculate whether or not these or other parts of the questionnaire prompted students to think more about teachers' pets and/or class victims. The fact remains that though the topics of teachers' pets and class victims were not included in the questionnaire, almost 10% of the 6065 student respondents made reference to, and in most cases elaborated upon, these phenomena in the classroom.

By taking a symbolic interactionist orientation to this type of qualitative data, the present analysis is designed to *sensitize* (Blumer, 1969: 147-152) the concepts of teachers' pets and class victims. The first task was to separate the comments related to teachers' pets and class victims from those reflecting other student concerns. These comments were then studied to see what general themes, if any, could be identified in them. A theme relating to teachers' pets class victims was identified as to the degree of *theoretical saturation* (Glaser and Strauss, 1967: 61) reached. In other words, once an issue was found to be recurring in the comments of students from different schools, the issue was identified as a theme in the teachers' pet/class victims phenomena. These themes have been identified as (1) teachers' attitudes toward students, (2) teacher criteria for student categorization, (3) the nature of favours and mistreatments in the classroom, (4) consequences of favouring and mistreating strategies, and (5) disagreement with pets victims phenomena.

Once these themes were isolated and the data categorized accordingly, the next step was to focus on this data in order to pinpoint more specific topics within the general themes. The present article focuses on but one of these general themes, the student-perceived consequences of classroom favouritism and mistreatment. The findings on this theme challenge us to use various theoretical orientations to elaborate on the complexities of teachers' pets class victims phenomena and their impact on instruction.

TEACHERS' PETS AND CLASS VICTIMS

The answer to the question, "Do teachers have pets?" depends on the existence and identity of respondents as teachers or students. Even before the question was posed, numerous students clearly presented the view that teachers' pets constitute an important part of the classroom culture.

Class victims may be defined as students who, from the student perspective, are either mistreated or neglected by the teacher (relative to

the treatment and attention given to other students) to the extent that they (or others) see themselves as experiencing mistreatment or neglect. Many students felt that "some teachers are always picking on certain students," even when those students are not doing "anything wrong." It was also felt that particular students got more help with their academic work than others.

While the teacher perspective on student pets and class victims is an important dimension of these phenomena, the present research focuses on the student perspective of classroom life. It is argued that if students believe that teachers have pets and victims, this belief is important in student definitions of teachers, teachers' actions and of the students' own plans of action in interacting with teachers and fellow-students. In other words, regardless of whether teachers' pets and class victims exist from the teacher perspective, and whether students misinterpret the actions of teachers toward specific students, the subjective reality of teachers' pets and class victims for students is extremely important in student definitions of classroom situations and plans of action.

Comments from students representing different schools indicate their belief that most teachers would deny having pets, and would deny that some students are mistreated or neglected, though students are convinced that teachers favour certain students over others and that some students are victimized because of this. The present study indicated that many students perceive teachers to have sharply contrasting attitudes toward different categories of students, and they develop equally contrasting plans of action toward them. More specifically, teachers were seen to favour teachers' pets and to mistreat or neglect those seemingly destined to become class victims.

CONSEQUENCES FOR SELF-DEFINED PETS

Some of the respondents in the present study saw themselves as teachers' pets and thought that their classmates also defined them in this way. Without delving into the intricacies of the classroom, it might be assumed that a teacher's pet would have considerable prestige in interactions between students. However, the present data indicated that this is not necessarily so; students who were defined as teachers' pets found it difficult to gain classmate acceptance. Apparently, they are often on the receiving end of jokes amongst their peers. Some of those who see themselves as pets indicated guilt concerning favours received from teachers. And while teachers generally seemed to favour pets, they are also sometimes perceived to hold greater expectations for them than for other students. In so doing, teachers place certain pressures on their pets.

Interestingly enough, students who perceived themselves as pets, like those who perceive themselves as victims, offered several negative comments concerning classroom pets. For certain students it seems that

being a teacher's pet means that one is also victimized, although obviously in a different manner from those who are mistreated or neglected. It may also be that pets are victimized by peers; students who attempt to garner favour from their teachers are usually disliked.

CONSEQUENCES FOR CLASS VICTIMS AND OTHERS

The consequences of mistreatment or neglect for non-pets and class victims, as revealed by our present data, can be analysed under five headings: (1) "being left out," (2) the marking process, (3) the disciplining process, (4) disliking teachers, and (5) antipathy and empathy amongst students.

"Being Left Out"

The experience of "being left out" because of teachers' definitions of certain students and actions toward them was common among high school students in the present study. Furthermore, those who thought that they were left out of the main lines of action and interaction in the classroom reported that they become "annoyed" with their teachers and "turned off" from their school work.

It was also observed that those with low averages are often left to "suffer through the grade" as teachers give their undivided attention to students with the highest averages. Other respondents pointed out that further consequences of teachers victimization include a lack of extra help in academic work and/or guidance in social development. Students suggested that sometimes teachers encouraged "top students" to maintain, if not improve, academic performances, while ignoring students at the bottom of the academic hierarchy. Some thought that teachers assume that most students at the bottom of the academic hierarchy will remain there, and therefore gave little attention to directing such students' efforts to improve their academic performance. Needless to say, the merits of this teaching strategy are not always obvious to students at the lower end of the academic performance hierarchy. In addition, some students perceive teachers to direct their teaching toward specific students while neglecting others, thereby creating a "boring" setting for the neglected.

The Marking Process

As expected, the criteria which students perceive teachers to use in categorizing them in the classroom include teachers' perceptions of whether or not a student is "smart," and whether or not a student gets high marks on examinations, tests, and other written assignments. If in fact teachers favour the more intelligent students, it would be interesting to know whether such students are helped because of their intelligence or

whether they are intelligent because of extra attention from teachers. Similarly, do teachers favour students getting high marks, or do some students get high marks because of attention given by teachers? On occasions, students actually accuse teachers of assigning marks to certain students, while depriving others of marks because of attitudes toward, and definitions of, students concerned. In short, one of the consequences of teachers' pets class victims phenomena, as seen by some students, is that marking examinations and other written assignments is sometimes not "fair."

In addition to seeing "good marks" associated with teachers' pets, some students claim that poor academic performances are due to the lack of attention received from certain teachers relative to attention given to pets. It has also been pointed out that if a student is perceived to be getting marks because he/she is a teacher's pet, other students become discouraged, study less, and obtain marks lower than would have been obtained otherwise.

Discipline

Aside from teachers' definition of what constitutes "misbehaviour," some students thought that teachers' attitudes toward particular students and their definitions of those students affected their disciplining. For example, the consequence of not being a teacher's pet came to mean to many students that the teacher "is always picking on" them. The term "picking on" was often used to imply that teachers were mistreating them, not letting them do the things that other students are allowed to do, and, in general, controlling their freedom, relative to other students. Other comments indicated that students often saw themselves as victims of a lack of teacher understanding of students. The clear consequence of putting a student "down", as pointed out, was that it made students "feel bad." As with the marking process, the discipline may be seen by students as both an instance and consequence of favours and mistreatments.

Disliking Teachers

Teachers are not only perceived to have pets, but are also seen to dislike other students – hence, classroom victims. It is not surprising that students dislike teachers seen to be favouring particular students and mistreating others. While considerable dislike exists for teachers who have pets, there is even more dislike for those seen to be mistreating students. Teachers' negative attitudes toward their students were, according to many students, countered with similar student attitudes toward those teachers. And, it is the teacher who is often seen to be the initiator of the cycle of dislike between teacher and student. There were, however, some students who believed that their attitudes and actions were the main

factors in influencing teachers' definitions of them. Whoever is the original culprit, students generally agree that learning is influenced by the attitudes students believe teachers to hold toward them.

Antipathy and Empathy Among Students

As a result of their perceptions concerning the existence of teachers' pets and class victims, some students reported having antipathetic attitudes and relationships with those perceived to be teachers' pets. Empathy with those whom they see as being victimized by teachers' actions in the classroom was also a common response among high school students. In addition, there was widespread indignation toward teachers' pets. More specifically, favouring certain students over others was seen to cause student annoyance with their teachers which may result in disturbances in the classroom, because those others got "jealous" when they saw teachers giving "advantages" to their pets.

Even though most students who reported teacher victimization saw themselves as those who were being picked on, some respondents who commented on victimization did not see it in reference to themselves. They did, however, indicate empathy with, or sympathy for, those perceived as victims in the classroom.

PETS AND VICTIMS: A CHALLENGE

Using the notions of identities and situated identities, the classroom can be seen as an extremely complex social setting where actors not only negotiate numerous identities acceptable to one another, but different participants develop definitions for themselves and for others for which there are varying degrees of awareness and agreement. Teachers' pets and class victims are cases in point. The idea of teachers' pets has been well known for some time. But, the possibility that certain students become victimized has received relatively little attention in the literature related to the sociology of the school. Even less attention has been given to the degree of awareness teachers and students have concerning one another's definitions of the other. There is considerable evidence to show that numerous students perceive teachers' pets and class victims as important situated identities in the classroom. It may be that teachers do not perceive these identities to be as common as students claim they are. However, their importance to students demands the attention of researchers attempting to understand classroom interaction processes, and of teachers who are very much a part of these processes. The task of isolating and understanding the processes of student categorization goes beyond the assumption that students are categorized according to ability measured by IQ, or by academic achievement measured by tests and examinations in specific subject areas. The classroom is not immune to the complex social

processes whereby individuals become typified (labelled, stereotyped) in everyday life, albeit as found in the classroom, those processes may differ. As suggested by classroom life reflected in teacher-student relations with the students as a captive audience, and in the decision making and judgments about progress in academic and social domains, particular aspects of student categorization and student perceptions of such categorizations set them apart from everyday categorization processes.

The complexities of the processes relating to teachers' pets and class victims are considerable. One student in the present study, for example, pointed to the possibility of the chicken and egg question regarding teachers' pets. She opined that it was "unfair" for teachers to choose favourites because it "discourages the other students" from working and wanting to become involved in activities in the classroom. It was suggested that their lack of interest and involvement means that teachers will give them less attention, because "as teachers they get turned off from students who are not interested." Where teachers and students are seemingly discouraged because of one another's perceived actions one might inquire which came first, teachers' definitions of students or students' definitions of teachers. While teachers' and students' definitions of one another often simultaneously develop the predispositions which they bring to the situation and their initial encounters are also important. Do teachers select students for participation in certain activities because these students are pets or, do these students become pets because they are participating in certain activities? Similarly, do certain students get high marks because they are pets or are they pets because they get higher marks? Do smart students get more attention from the teacher than do other students? Do those who get more attention from teachers become, or appear to be, smart because of the attention they are getting?

An overriding theme in the consequences of teachers' pets and class victims, as isolated by students, is that dimensions of teachers' attitudes towards students, their actions in the classroom and their plans of action for students are influential in fostering some of the generally defined negative aspects of student performance and classroom behaviour. From the perspectives of the students' comments, it is argued that academic failure, disciplinary problems and, even, the dropout phenomenon cannot be fully explained by the socioeconomic backgrounds of students, and/or such student psychological characteristics as intelligence, motivation, and aspiration. One must look at the sociological dimensions of classroom teaching-learning processes, including the interpretations which students give to their teachers' actions. It is the interpretation and reinterpretations of one another's attitudes, actions, and plans of action which form the spring-board for the interactions and social relationships that develop in the classroom.

In adapting this orientation to teacher-student interactions, we move away from questions concerning achievement and discipline posed by

students in the classroom, and pay attention to problems posed by teachers for students. These problems as they relate to teachers' pets and class victims have been outlined here to include feelings of "being left out" and of not being understood by teachers who exert a commanding influence on molding the overall social climate in the classroom. While the focus on the student perspective moves away from the traditional attention to student achievement and discipline problems, in the long term it may give another view, and perhaps a more complete explanation of these problems.

NOTES

- ¹ A distinction has also been made between *identity* and *situated identity*, on the one hand, and *social identity* and *situated social identity*, on the other. The former refers to processes associated with "the person as object to self," and the latter to "the person as object to others" (Hewitt, 1976: 80). Except to note that pets and victims defined here are from the student perspective, the present data do not allow a detailed analysis of whether definitions of specific students as pets and/or victims are derived from students as objects to selves, or are definitions of others for those students. Therefore, the use of the terms *identity* and *situated identity* differs somewhat from general usage in that as used here they may, on occasions, be referring to social identity and situated social identity rather than identity and situated identity.
- ² The survey questionnaire is part of a larger research project which uses case study techniques and formal interviewing to study classroom experiences of high school students in Newfoundland and Labrador.

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Mit Benutzung der im symbolischen Interaktionalismus entwickelten Begriffe "Identität" und "Zustandsidentität" konzentriert sich dieser Aufsatz auf die von Schülern empfundenen Folgen des Lieblings/Opfer Phänomen in Gymnasien. Die Folgen für selbst-definierte Lieblinge umfassen das Ertragen des Hänslens der Klassenkameraden und das Erdulden von Druckausübung der Lehrer, das nach Empfindung des Schülers grösser auf ihn als auf die anderen ist, in Bezug auf Schulleistung und Betragen. Die Folgen für Klassenopfer sind in der Zensurierung und Erziehung, in der Entwicklung von Abneigung gegen Lehrer, in der Abneigung unter Schülern und in der Schüler-Einfühlung für jene Schüler, die scheinbar durch das Verhalten des Lehrers belästigt werden, zu sehen. Die Gesamtheit des Lieblings/Opfer Phänomens fordert Forscher sowie Lehrer dazu auf, verschiedene theoretische Richtungen und Forschungsmethoden anzuwenden, um die Lehrer/Schüler Beziehung zu verstehen.

Utilizando los conceptos de "identidad" y de "identidad situacional" tal como los desarrolla el interaccionismo simbólico, este artículo estudia cómo perciben los estudiantes en la secundaria las consecuencias de ser el favorito o la víctima del profesor. Aquellos estudiantes que perciben ser ellos mismos los favoritos indican que sus compañeros se burlan de ellos y que los profesores esperan más de ellos que de los otros alumnos, tanto desde el punto de vista académico como del de comportamiento. En cuanto a las víctimas, los estudiantes consideran que las consecuencias de este fenómeno se manifiestan en las notas que reciben y en la disciplina que se les aplica; indican sentimientos de aversión hacia los profesores y de antipatía entre estudiantes, así como sentimientos de empatía hacia los que consideran ser las víctimas de los profesores. El fenómeno del favorito-víctima es muy complejo y constituye un desafío tanto para los investigadores como para los profesores, y exige que se utilicen varias orientaciones y técnicas teóricas y de investigación para poder comprender mejor las interacciones entre profesor y estudiante.

Wilfred B. W. Martin is a Professor in the Department of Education Foundations, Memorial University of Newfoundland, St. John's, Newfoundland A1B 3X8.