

Recollections of schoolteachers' nicknames

W. Ray Crozier
Cardiff University

An investigation of schoolteachers' nicknames recalled by a sample of 103 students showed that the majority of nicknames were negative in tone and directed mostly at disliked and unpopular teachers. Distinctive physical characteristics and variations on the teacher's name were the main sources of nicknames, a finding that is consistent with previous research into nicknames that are used openly as forms of address. The functions that names play in the life of the school and the contribution of wit to the effectiveness of names are discussed.

Introduction

The nicknames that teachers attract are of interest for reasons over and above their ubiquity in school life. First, they yield insight into the school as a social institution. Nicknames are optional rather than obligatory linguistic categories (de Klerk and Bosch, 1996) that usually involve an interaction between a speaker and an addressee and hence are informative about the culture in which they are used and about the nature of social relationships within that culture (Wierzbicka, 1992). Morgan, O'Neill, and Harré (1979, p. 143) argue that a teacher's nickname is revealing of the "social and psychological relations that pupils see as obtaining between themselves and the teaching staff, and represents the reputation in pupil opinion of each teacher."

Second, they yield insights into processes of naming, since they represent distinctive uses of nicknames. They are used to refer to a third party, typically in a clandestine fashion, rather than function as a form of address. Furthermore, they can be shared within a community and passed on from generation to generation of students, "behind the back," as it were, of the bearer of the name. These properties raise interesting questions about the forms and functions of

nicknames that are used in these ways. One question is whether the categories of nicknames that characteristically serve as forms of address are also evident when they have a reference function. Studies of nicknames show that they tend to be based mostly on physical appearance and also draw upon psychological traits and habits, and variations on the bearer's name (Butkus, 1999; de Klerk and Bosch, 1996; Fortado, 1998; Zaitzow et al., 1997). However, there exists little evidence on teachers' nicknames, although Morgan et al. (1979) devote a brief appendix of their study of nicknames in school to those attracted by teachers; this study is considered further below.

We can also inquire about the process of coining names, specifically the role that wit plays. An attempt at wit characterizes name-calling and nicknames in general. Perhaps it contributes to the effectiveness of names and their longevity, and the shared laughter that they elicit adds to the enjoyment of school life. The perceived aptness of a nickname might also contribute to this. There exists little evidence on the role of wit or aptness in nicknames. Finally, it can be asked what functions these names serve in the community of the school given their hidden nature and the fact that their use as a form of address is prohibited and, if uncovered, would be punished.

The aim of this study is to examine these questions by means of a questionnaire survey of university students' recollections of their school days. While this approach does not provide a systematic picture of names within a single institution it does collect information about nicknames in a large sample of different schools since the participating students had attended schools across Britain. Furthermore, it is possible to question participants about their views on the names and invite them to reflect upon them without any problems of immaturity of respondents or their possible concerns about teachers finding out their opinions. The method adopted is to invite participants to recall the nickname

of a teacher at a school they had attended prior to university and to say in their own words why they believe the teacher attracted this name. This is followed by items inviting ratings on scales referring to characteristics of the teacher, the nickname, and its context. Such an autobiographical memory approach has proved valuable in studies of nicknames (de Klerk and Bosch, 1996), name-calling (Crozier and Skliopidou, 2002), teasing (Kowalski, 2000), and humor (Van Giffen and Maher, 1995).

Method

Participants

Questionnaires were completed by 103 undergraduates taking courses in social sciences. The courses recruit mostly female students and this is reflected in the gender distribution of the sample (93 women, 10 men). Questionnaires were administered during classes and students were asked to complete them individually without conferring. They were assured of confidentiality and quotations in this paper respect respondents' wishes as expressed in an item that sought their permission to reproduce material from the completed questionnaire.

Questionnaire

This was produced specifically for this study. The first items invited participants to "Think of a teacher at your school who had a nickname that you remember" and to write a response to the question, "What was this nickname?" Space was provided to write a response to an item, "Why do you think he or she was called this particular name?" and to an item asking "What made this a good nickname for this person?" An item asked how many people called the teacher this nickname. A set of questions with "yes," "no," and "don't know" as response options asked whether the teacher was aware of being called the name and a set of possible reasons why the teacher was called this name. Sets of five-point rating scales

requested respondents' ratings of qualities of the nicknames, the teacher's likely response if he or she was aware of it, and characteristics of the teacher. A final series of items inquired about the teacher's gender and age and the participant's gender.

Results

Prevalence and awareness of nicknames

This first section addresses issues of how many people called the teacher the nickname and whether the teacher was aware of it. Bearers of nicknames were more likely to be men (63 male, 40 female teachers) who taught in secondary [high] schools (93 teachers compared with 6 in primary and 4 in other schools [sixth-form or tertiary colleges]). The nicknames had common currency. Most (73% of nicknames) were known throughout the school, compared to 11% known to just the respondent's year, 6% to just their class, and 7% to a small group of pupils. A small minority (4%) stated that other teachers as well as students knew the target teacher's nickname. Several respondents commented spontaneously that nicknames are passed on from year to year or from one generation of pupils to another: "It was a name that he had for many years and it just got passed down to each new year that joined. Nobody could remember where it started." "He had it when I was a first year so he probably had it for years." The name "was catchy and everyone picked it up very quickly, even people who had not yet arrived at the school [e.g. children from the local primary 'feeder' school] knew the name." In other cases the origins of the names are known and more recent: "Some boys in the year made it up and it stuck with the rest of the year."

There was little consensus about whether teachers were aware of their nickname; 47% of respondents thought so, 18% thought not, and 35% stated that they didn't know. A statistical analysis (Kruskal Wallis test) compared ratings of the properties of nicknames attracted by teachers who were

thought to be aware with properties of teachers who were unaware or where the respondent did not know if the teacher was aware. Nicknames of which teachers were thought to be aware were rated as significantly less derogatory, less hurtful, and less offensive than those where the teacher was unaware or the respondent did not know. On the other hand, there was no relationship between teacher awareness and ratings of the aptness, cleverness, or wittiness of the name. It would seem that participants thought it unlikely that teachers would be aware of the most offensive names although an alternative explanation, that they considered a name to be less offensive because the teacher was aware of it, cannot be ruled out.

Categories of names

The names and the stated reasons for them were inspected and coded into two categories, based on those devised by Morgan et al. (1979)—internal and external formations. The former are derivatives of the actual name, for example using rhymes, alliterations, contractions, verbal analogues, or adding a suffix. The latter draw upon factors extrinsic to the name, for example, characteristics of the person such as his or her appearance. External formations were divided into three substantive categories—references to physical appearance, specific incidents, and personality traits, respectively—and into a miscellaneous or “other” category (examples are voice, body odor, and teacher’s nationality). Where more than one reason was given for a nickname they were coded separately; the 103 nicknames yielded 130 reasons.

Table 1 presents the proportion of reasons in each category and shows that external formations were more common and that the predominant category of external formation was physical appearance. Internal formations accounted for 22% of reasons. Some nicknames were coined for more than one reason—17% combined an internal and external formation.

Table 1: Internal and external formations as reasons for nicknames

Formation	% of reasons
Internal	22
External	78
Physical appearance	47
Personality trait	22
Specific incident	4
Other	5

Statistical analysis (Chi-square test) showed that the distribution of internal and external formations was not influenced by the gender of the teacher, whether the teacher was thought to be aware of the name, or whether the name expressed liking or dislike.

Nicknames encompassed a wide range of physical characteristics—baldness, wearing a wig, hairstyle, shape of head, eye defect, protruding eyes, large mole on forehead, double chin, large chin, hanging jowls, arrangement of teeth, red face, characteristic facial expression, being very tall, overweight, large bust, large thighs, hairy back. Nicknames are also based on items of clothing like a belt, jumper, and (more than once) sports shorts. The tendency is to seize upon a distinctive or pronounced feature or mannerism, perhaps exaggerating it or searching for a humorous association, and the effect is to ridicule the bearer. Physical resemblance also provided a basis for a nickname and involved a range of comparisons, real or fictional, cartoon characters or

animals—*Barbie*, *Chewy* [*Chewbacca*, from the *Star Wars* movies], *Penny Crayon*, *Donkey*, *Father Christmas*, *Gorilla*, *Hitler*, *Pavarotti*, and *Tintin*.

Personality characteristics and attitudes gave rise to a number of nicknames. In particular, there were several references to the teacher's strictness, bad temper and fearsomeness, represented in nicknames like *Death Breath*, *Dragon*, *Jaws*, and *Nasty*, including several military examples—*S.S.*, and more than one *Hitler*.

There is evidence of a variety of internal formations, including rhyme (*Miller the Killer*, *Myrtle the Turtle*), alliteration (*Polly Parrot*, *Thunder Thighs*), repetition (*Chin Chin*), phonetic similarity to the teacher's name (*Mr. Diarea*, *The White Witch*), and semantic derivatives of it (*Beachball*, *Sweeney Todd*). These derivatives could involve more than one step. *Strawbs* was an abbreviation of *Strawberry*, a rhyme for Audrey (the teacher's first name), and the students drew upon this formation to consider that she looked like a strawberry (on the basis of her coloring). Mr. Owen taught German, and became *Herr Owen* and, by rhyme, *Heroin* (and *Really screws you up*, drawing upon a slogan from a television anti-drugs campaign).

Wit and aptness

These are important properties of nicknames. When respondents had an opportunity to say why they thought the nickname was a good one for the teacher the most common references were to the nickname being "apt," "suitable," "appropriate," "relevant," "concise," "amusing," "made us all laugh," "fitted him well," "summed him up well," and described her "completely" or "accurately." However, wit and aptness seem to have different relationships with other properties of the nicknames. Correlational analysis (Spearman's rho) applied to ratings of nicknames showed that aptness and wittiness were significantly inter-correlated (0.43). Nevertheless, they differed in their relationships with ratings of the negative qualities of nicknames. Aptness was

significantly and negatively correlated with the degree to which names were hurtful (-0.24) and offensive (-0.25) whereas wittiness was not related to either of these, with non-significant coefficients close to -0.10 in each case. That is to say, the more offensive the nickname the less apt it was rated, a relationship that does not hold for the perceived wit of a name.

The next step was to consider aptness and wit in terms of humor processes. We have already referred to the use of linguistic devices like alliteration and rhyme that can contribute to humor. We have also noted the tendency to use physical characteristics to ridicule teachers, in ways analogous to caricature—seizing and exaggerating a distinctive feature, or finding an associate for it. For example, a male teacher's hairstyle and beard is thought to resemble an upside-down toilet brush and he becomes *Boggy* ['bog' is slang for toilet]. Many nicknames draw upon stock characters—Hitler, a dragon—or the physical stereotypes of stage and screen comedy—the military figure (*Mr. Major*), the tall thin man (*High Tower*), or the amply-bosomed woman (*Turbo Tits*). There are examples of incongruity and irony. One respondent explained the reason for the name *Spunky*—"Ironic twist: he was very ugly!!" A male sports teacher is called *Tan Tights*, the allusion to pantyhose subverting the contribution of his tanned legs to a "macho" identity.

Several names draw upon more than one characteristic of the individual, and this seems to contribute to the effectiveness of a nickname.

Sweeney Todd: "Because of his name and was a really nasty teacher."

Mental: "It was a rhyming thing. She was very strange and the word mental just happened to rhyme with her name."

Myrtle the Turtle: "Because she looked like a turtle and her name was Myrtle."

Also, "showing-off" or pomposity invites nicknames that are intended to deflate egos, as in the case of *Tan Tights*, or the following examples.

Himbo: "It summed him up quite well. He was a nice bloke but too preoccupied with his own appearance."

Gorilla: "Very hairy teacher who used to wander from swimming pool to sports centre with no top on so his hairy back was on full show."

The functions of names

Consideration of the functions that names serve has to take into account the predominantly negative tone of the nicknames, which is evident from three sources—ratings of the characteristics of target teachers, the reasons given for the nicknames, and conjectures about the teacher's reaction if she or he were aware of the name. First, the perceived characteristics of teachers are reflected in the substantial proportion of respondents who endorsed the two most "negative" points on five-point rating scales assessing the extent to which the target teacher was admired, popular, respected, disliked and strict (see Table 2a). Second, when asked to endorse possible reasons for the teacher being called the name, there was a preponderance of "negative" reasons, and only 20% of respondents stated that the nickname expressed liking (Table 2b). Finally, respondents rated on a set of five-point scales their estimation of how the teacher would react if he or she were aware of being called this name. Very few respondents believed the teacher would be amused, proud, or would enjoy the nickname (Table 2c). Taken together, responses to these three items indicate the predominantly negative tone of the nicknames.

Table 2: Negative tone of nicknames

(a) Proportion of respondents endorsing two least positive points on teacher rating scales

Scale	% of respondents
Admired	62
Popular	63
Respected	52
Disliked	31
Strict	29

(b) Proportion of reasons for nickname

Reason	% of reasons
Express dislike	54
Express contempt	33
To get even	34
To put one over	44
Express liking	20

(c) Proportion of respondents inferring teacher reactions if teacher were aware of nickname

Teacher would be:	% of respondents
Angry	38
Offended	32
Embarrassed	25
Hurt	18
Amused	8
Proud	6
Enjoy name	6

In summary, a substantial proportion of participants responded that nicknames were intended to express contempt

or dislike, or attempts to get back or get even, or to put one over on the teacher. The names served additional functions. There was mention of some of the ways in which nicknames help pupils cope with school, for example, "it made people less afraid of her by mocking the way she acted." Some teachers "deserve" a nickname: "He was horrible and embarrassed students so he needed a nickname;" "She was quite strict and used to pick on certain people so they created a nickname to show their disliking/lack of respect for her;" "She was very loud and obnoxious. Had she been a bit nicer I doubt she would have been called it." Pupils might use it in front of the teacher to provoke a response ("Boys used to shout it out in order to make him angry which usually worked"). One teacher had initiated the name: "to put his pupils at ease."

Nevertheless, not all names are malicious and those assigned to teachers who are liked could create a bond between teacher and pupil, for example, a name expressing liking where the anticipated teacher's response was "very amused." "enjoy it," and "proud of it" was considered a good nickname because "she was always happy so knew she'd take it as a joke." These nicknames frequently took the forms that previous research (De Klerk and Bosch, 1996) has shown to signal affection and friendship, for example, use of initials (*P. J.*), abbreviation (*Mr. Ben*), contracting and adding a suffix (-s) (*Bartles*), and adding or ending with the diminutive suffix (/i/) (*Besty, Jiffy, Oggy*).

Discussion

Naming is pervasive in social organizations and schools are no exception. All the participants could readily produce a nickname for a teacher and describe its characteristics. Many of the nicknames are longstanding and are adopted by succeeding generations of students rather than invented afresh. Sometimes their longevity has resulted in

their origins becoming obscure, but in the large majority of cases students can identify the reasons for the teacher having a particular nickname. It would be instructive to discover why some names "stick" while others presumably do not. Although we have no direct evidence for this, the study suggests that aptness and wit of names are factors in this since these properties are highly valued by respondents, and effective nicknames seem "just right."

The distribution of different categories of nicknames is consistent with the distributions found in samples of children attending school in America (Busse, 1983) and Britain (Crozier and Dimmock, 1999; Crozier and Skliopidou, 2002; Morgan et al., 1979). It is also consistent with distributions identified in samples of adults in the American workplace (Fortado, 1998), American female prisoners (Zaitzow et al., 1997), South African adolescents attending a school festival (de Klerk and Bosch, 1997), and a national sample in Lithuania (Butkus, 1999). Variations of the individual's name and distinctive physical appearance are the principal sources of nicknames, and this trend seems to hold for the clandestine use of nicknames as well as for those that serve an address function.

Morgan et al. (1979) argue that appearance and personality predominate in children's nicknames because they represent key issues in the social world of childhood; nicknames focus on the issues in operating as agents of social control, enforcing compliance with norms and penalizing deviations from norms. Why do they also predominate in children's nicknames for adults? One implication of Morgan et al.'s position is that nicknames for teachers resemble those used by children for each other because appearance and personality projection are so central to children's concerns. An alternative explanation is proposed by Crozier and Dimmock (1999), who argue that names that are intended to be hurtful are a form of shaming and have their effect by threatening the target person's identity in various ways. Hence names involve deindividuation of one type or another, challenging the

integrity of the individual's name, treating people as an object by identifying them with a category, or reducing them to a distinctive feature, or dehumanizing them by identifying them with an animal. More prosaically, the teacher's role is a public one, as the center of students' attention for extended periods of time, dominating the room and the proceedings. Anecdotal evidence suggests that students can be surprised when they meet their teachers outside school, or after they have left school, to discover how "normal" they appear. Distinctive features and mannerisms will become salient whenever someone adopts such a conspicuous role. Further exploration of explanations for the important role physical characteristics play in nicknames for adults is an issue worthy of future research.

What is distinctive about the nicknames coined for teachers is their predominantly negative tone. This contrasts with findings from previous research. For example, de Klerk and Bosch (1996) reported that intentions for nicknames in their study of adolescents were predominantly friendly with only a minority critical or sarcastic. This difference is surely informative about subordinate-superior relationships including student-teacher relationships. Martineau (1972) has proposed that jokes that are shared by a group and have an external target function to increase solidarity within the group and to promote a hostile attitude toward the out-group. Boxer and Cortés-Conde (1997, p. 281) make a similar point about the bonds that humor can create and suggest that humorous language can create a "special in-group terminology that bonds the group and unites them against the 'others'." Coining and sharing nicknames seems to serve a similar function. For example, research suggests that the use of nicknames in prison helps build solidarity among prisoners (Zaitzow et al., 1997) and among coalminers (Skipper, 1986). The external targets or out-group are often authority figures, which, in the case of school, comprise the teachers. Negatively valenced names, which encompass the large majority of

nicknames in this study, indicate the hostility directed towards teachers and reflect what Morgan et al. (1979, p. 145) term the "us and them" nature of relationships in schools.

Name-calling in general relates to asymmetries in power relationships, and typically the less powerful are called names by those who have more power. However, the clandestine use of names by students provides a means for the weak to reclaim some power in the situation in which they find themselves (de Klerk and Bosch, 1997). They can use names to retaliate against their oppressors and to express solidarity and support for one another. These functions were evident in students' ratings of the reasons for nicknames and in spontaneous comments about "getting back" and "getting even."

Nevertheless, nicknames are directed at individual teachers and are tailored to fit their particular characteristics and attitudes. Whereas disliked and unpleasant teachers attract derogatory and offensive names, teachers who are admired, liked, and popular attract names that are regarded by students as less offensive and hurtful and which, they believe, would cause less offense if known. These names are similar in form to those used as means of address, for example, drawing upon internal formations that incorporate shortened forms of names with -s and /-i/ suffixes. This variation is surely significant for attempts to understand the process of coining nicknames, as it implies that the process is not simply one of seizing upon some distinctive feature or characteristic but also involves the intention for deciding on the name.

Aptness and wit are regarded as important elements of teachers' nicknames. There was considerable variation across respondents in their ratings of nicknames on these properties and evidence that aptness was modestly and negatively correlated with perceptions of the offensiveness of a name. One implication, albeit not one that can be drawn unambiguously from a correlational analysis, is that a name

that is too hostile is less effective. A systematic analysis of teachers' names that vary in offensiveness and derogatory nature would provide insight into this relationship, for example there might be an inverted-U relation between hostility and aptness.

Since Freud's (1976) account of jokes in terms of discharge of psychic energy, theorists have regarded wit as a disguised form of aggression or have emphasized its capacity to release aggression (Veatch, 1998). Nevertheless, wit may have functions over and above expressing aggression. To be able to laugh at something or someone is to show superiority to it. This is compatible with the tendency for many names to contrast the normally powerful teacher who has dignity and high status with the foolish or ineffectual figure created by the sarcastic or derogatory nickname. Coining humorous or appropriate names can build one's confidence, reducing the power of the authority figure while at the same time strengthening bonds with those in the same predicament as oneself. Jokes and laughter represent the currency of social exchange, and sharing good names for authority figures increases social solidarity among those over whom authority is exercised.

Many of the nicknames lack the humor they aim at, at least to an adult outsider's perspective, and draw upon stock characters and stereotypes. On the other hand, some are imaginative and make use of humor devices such as irony, incongruity, and condensation. There are factors that presumably influence the level of wit or originality of a successful nickname. They have wide currency in the school, which perhaps restricts their subtlety since they have to appeal to a wide audience of varied ages. But also, they must be clever enough to capture attention. Perhaps, too, there are parallel restrictions on the offensiveness of nicknames, where those that are either too nasty or not unpleasant enough fail to become established.

There have been few empirical studies of teachers' nicknames. This study has limitations, particularly as it is based on recollections rather than a study of the process of naming within schools. It is possible that participants are more likely to recall derogatory names because these are more vivid so that affectionate or neutral names may be under-represented in this sample. Asking participants to recall the nickname of only one teacher could also have influenced them to report more memorable examples. Also, the method excludes those teachers who fail to attract nicknames. A further limitation is that the gender bias in the sample means that the study is predominantly about the nicknames recalled by female students. Nevertheless, the study has identified several findings of interest about the properties of these nicknames and the characteristics of teachers who are their targets, and it suggests issues that surely deserve further research.

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