

## **A STUDY ON TEACHER CHARACTERISTICS AND THEIR EFFECTS ON STUDENTS ATTITUDES**

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### **Abstract**

Adequately defining the students' perceptions about teachers has been at the core of much research and controversy for many years. The present study administered a questionnaire in the Turkish mono-lingual setting and was done as an extension of earlier studies to provide feedback to Turkish teachers. A total of 181 9, 10, 11 grade students attending four different state schools answered a questionnaire and three open-ended questions aimed at assessing their attitude toward their perceptions of teacher characteristics (professional, pedagogical, and personal), as well as learning. The results might illuminate the ways of reaching at a better learning atmosphere through self-assured and self-esteemed students.

### **Introduction**

Classroom management is frequently conceptualized as a matter of control rather than as a dimension of curriculum, instruction, and overall classroom climate (Duke, 1982). As our greatest concern has been to try to avoid prescriptive behavior in its general sense within classrooms, there is, in fact, a certain degree of tension and misattribution between flexibility of control and prescriptive attitudes in the classroom atmosphere. Therefore, we have to persuade ourselves that not everyone will express things in the same words or perceive them in the same way, and that not everyone will move at the same rate or in the same direction. Based on the findings of the research conducted by Borophy (1988a:1), it is highly probable that teachers who approach classroom management, as a process of establishing and maintaining effective learning environments, and as a multi-lateral ambience, tend to be more successful than others who place more emphasis on their roles as authority figures or disciplinarians since classrooms are composed of numerous different personal views, characteristics, ethics and values.

In order to find a solid foundation for relationships, Buddhist psychology proposes that we (in our case: teachers and students) need to consider what we most value in our connection with someone we care about (Beck, 1993). What are the moments in a relationship we most cherish in real life? Considering that the classroom setting is some sort of a compact and miniaturized version of what we encounter in real lives of ours. It is fair to say that students primarily need to be recognized in such a classroom setting too. Otherwise, renewal and improvement would not come into being, especially when students are aware of the particular ways of "wearing a mask" so as to avoid being hurt again (Craig, 1994).

The classroom climate influenced by the teacher has a major impact on pupils' motivation and attitude towards learning, that is to say, for teachers, having been equipped with pedagogical and professional characteristics would not be enough to establish a positive, learnable, and teachable classroom climate. Specifically, the factors that best facilitate student learning are considered to be the ones that are described as being purposeful, task-oriented, relaxed, warm, supportive, and has a sense of order and humor in an integrated sense (Kumaravadivelu, 1992). He also speaks positively of other factors facilitating students learning in a positive manner such as; mutual respect and rapport etc. all of which stem from conveying to pupils that you understand, share, and value their feelings as individuals on a whole range of matters and experiences, academic, social and personal. Such a climate fosters learning and motivation of students and their attitudes toward learning process. Furthermore, Research indicates that certain personality characteristics influence student evaluations of teachers. From the students' points of view, teacher-expressive characteristics such as warmth, enthusiasm, and extroversion apparently separate effective from ineffective teachers (Basow, 2000; Basow & Silberg, 1987; Best & Addison, 2000; Bousfield, 1940; Cravens, 1996; Feldman, 1986; Guerrero & Miller, 1998; Marsh & Roche, 1997; Radmacher & Martin, 2001)

Reasoning in this way, out of three generally accepted characteristics of teachers, namely; professional, pedagogical, and personal, the last one of the three will illuminate, as a neglected vision to follow the end product-shapeable students, the ways of reaching at a better learning atmosphere as well as self-assured students. A combination of my experiences and some other colleagues' directed me to study what the teacher was like as an individual and how influential it is over students' attitudes towards learning and the degree of their engagement with learning. The proposition in mind was that pupils' attitude towards learning and being in a classroom was not just related to the technical or pedagogical competence or the professional qualities of the teacher, but it was related, in part, to what the teacher was like as a person. It is, in this paper, referred to as having a sort of '*rational human being*' qualities.

The present study was designed to investigate students' self-reported beliefs with a Data collection package (henceforth DCP) designed to assess students' attitudes towards teachers and learning. The study examined a questionnaire and three open-ended questions included in the DCP concerning teacher characteristics, students' beliefs about teachers' attitudes, their self-reported practices, and the relations between their self-reported beliefs about teachers' attitudes.

## **METHOD**

### **Participants**

The participants were 181 (140 females; 40 males) high school pupils enrolled in 4 different state schools in two provinces of Turkey. The views of 181 pupils, 9, 10, and 11 graders of high schools have been surveyed through the DCP. Their ages ranged from 16 to 18 years old. Six schools were asked to participate in the study. Letters taken from the Directorate of National Education and phone calls were used to encourage school participation. Four schools out of six participated in the small scaled cross-school project.

### **Instruments**

The teacher questionnaire (henceforth TQ) was developed out of an existing literacy survey (Zamorski, 2002; Haydn, 2002) in accordance with the needs of Turkish students. TQ was translated into Turkish. The items on the TQ and other questions were intended to sample students' beliefs and their self-reported practices towards their attitude to Teachers, learning and being in a classroom as direct participants.

In addition to assessing students' beliefs, the TQ and other questions needed to have information about school, age of pupils, gender and their ability level in classes, which was achieved through collecting pre-data about students before implementing the data collection package. (e.g., student grades, student participation during class-time). Prior to distribution of the data collection package, five high school teachers reviewed the instruments and offered suggestions about content and format. The survey was revised accordingly. The DCP contains two sections: **(a) TQ** **(b)** Open-ended questions: *what are the things that most put you off being in the classroom/learning a subject? - What are the things which most make you feel OK about being in the classroom/learning a subject? - Is there any other comment you would like to make about teachers, lessons, and how you are taught at school in general?*

### **Procedures**

The Directorate of National Education provided a contact list for English Division classes of state schools. All participating students received a letter requesting their cooperation prior to the administration. Because the TQ included students' evaluation of their teachers, the confidentiality of the responses was ensured. Data collection packages were distributed to the teachers in 4 high schools and the administration process began in the morning with a preliminary speech addressed to the participants and continued till the lunch break, 22nd of May, 2004.

A list of 'teacher characteristics' was adapted and arranged, which was a mixture of: *technical/pedagogical capability*, (e.g. "Explains things well", "Controls the class well"), *professional qualities* (e.g. "Marks and returns your work promptly", "Always seems well prepared"), and *personal characteristics*, which might also be defined as a teacher's 'style' of teaching (e.g. "Is friendly", "Says hello or nods to you outside the lesson"). The pupils were asked to circle the items on TQ. Students indicated the extent to which they agreed or disagreed with the statement using a 4-point Likert-type scale. The scale was anchored at one end by *unimportant* and at the other end by *essential*, meaning that a high score indicated strong endorsement of the item. The guidance given to pupils during the questionnaire can be seen in the **Appendix I**.

### **Data Analysis**

In order to fulfill the stated goals of this study, the items were analyzed by using factor analytic methods. The internal consistency reliability of the scale, assessed by Cronbach $\alpha$ , was found to be 0.85. Given that Cronbach  $\alpha$  is dependent upon the number of a scale it contains, this reliability coefficient is highly acceptable (Backhouse, Dickens, Rayner&Wood, 1982). At first hand, the responses given by the students to TQ were factor analyzed and gathered under 3 subgroups (dimensions). Since factor analyzing the input displayed that the items available in TQ were to be put into three subgroups namely, pedagogical, personal, and professional, the specifically obtained factors (dimensions) were named as the results displayed. The distributions of the scorings that students marked

were taken into consideration as descriptive findings. Additionally, variance analysis was used to test the gender and grade differences of students' scorings. At the final stage, subgroups obtained from factor analysis procedure were tested with Multi-Dimensional Scaling method of SPSS. Apart from TQ, open-ended questions that revealed students views were included in the analysis as a case study.

## **Results**

The following are the statistically analyzed results of the TQ under the necessary headings:

### **Results of the pupil responses**

<b>Table 1: Descriptive Statistics</b>			
	<b>N</b>	<b>Means</b>	<b>Std. Dev.</b>
Pedagogical	181	31,94	3,97
Personal	181	31,56	2,29
Professional	181	18,85	2,06
Total	181	82,34	7,87

As can be seen in Table 1, the mean scores of pedagogical and personal factors obtained from 181 participating students' seemed to be nearly the same, whereas the professional mean scores were significantly lower than the other two factors.

<b>Table 2: Results of Variance Analysis for Gender</b>					
		<b>Df</b>	<b>Mean Square</b>	<b>F</b>	<b>Sig.</b>
<b>Pedagogical</b>	Between Groups	1	72,766	4,715	0,03*
	Within Groups	179	15,433		
<b>Personal</b>	Between Groups	1	28,150	5,522	0,02*
	Within Groups	179	5,098		
<b>Professional</b>	Between Groups	1	55,317	13,953	0,00*
	Within Groups	179	3,965		

Table 2 exhibits a striking discrepancy in terms of the subgroup mean scores of students' motivation and perceptions toward their teachers and learning, ( $\alpha=0,05$ ). This discrepancy is available in Table 3.

<b>Table 3: Descriptive Statistics for Gender</b>				
		<b>N</b>	<b>Mean</b>	<b>Std. Deviation</b>
<b>Pedagogical</b>	Female	139	32,28	3,46
	Male	40	30,75	5,27
<b>Personal</b>	Female	140	31,77	1,9
	Male	41	30,83	3,19
<b>Professional</b>	Female	140	19,15	1,76
	Male	41	17,83	2,64

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\* Significant at the level of 0,05

When the subgroup mean scores of female and male participants' perceptions and motivation toward their teachers and learning were taken into account, the female participants did score significantly higher than the male participants in each of the subgroups: pedagogical, personal, and professional.

**Table: 4 Results of Variance Analysis for Grade**

		<b>Df</b>	<b>Mean Square</b>	<b>F</b>	<b>Sig.</b>
<b>Pedagogical</b>	Between Groups	2	314,715	25,468	0,00
	Within Groups	179	12,357		
<b>Personal</b>	Between Groups	2	102,565	24,822	0,00
	Within Groups	179	4,132		
<b>Professional</b>	Between Groups	2	81,839	24,227	0,00
	Within Groups	179	3,378		

As seen in Table 4, there is discrepancy in subgroup mean scores of students' when their grades are taken into account. This discrepancy can be seen in Table 5.

**Table: 5 Descriptive Statistics for Grade**

		<b>N</b>	<b>Mean</b>	<b>Std. Deviation</b>
<b>Pedagogical</b>	9	27	35,88	1,0537
	10	82	32,83	2,0127
	11	70	29,93	5,0009
<b>Personal</b>	9	27	33,18	1,0146
	10	82	32,26	0,6804
	11	70	30,30	3,0672
<b>Professional</b>	9	27	19,12	0,8575
	10	82	19,71	0,6878
	11	70	17,71	2,7562

Table 5 displays that the mean scores of students significantly lower down as their grades go up. It is quite apparent that 9 graders scored higher than the other two grades.

## **Discussion**

The combined student data from DCP indicated that pedagogical and personal scores of students were the top rated findings. Contrary to the expectations, overall student responses to the professional characteristics of teachers were significantly lower than the two other factors. Discrepancies among the three subgroups might be attributable to the institutions' and teachers' different missions and purposes as well as students' point of views. Additionally, there are factors that may restrict the generalizability of these findings at first sight: the majority of the sample consisted of female students, but a minority was male. Yet the general atmosphere in Turkey proves that in English division classes these findings may represent other counterparts since the male population in such classes is fairly low.

Although the research reported here did not look directly at gender differences in student perceptions of teachers' characteristics, research by Smith and her associates (1994) did. They found female students were more sensitive to the interpersonal characteristics of their teachers. The findings obtained in this study confirmed the previous research in this respect, whereas the findings of previous research conducted by Smith et al. (1994) asserted that Male students were more sensitive to whether their professors were knowledgeable and had a good sense of humor. Also, there is suggestion in the literature that female students tend to emphasize interpersonal and social characteristics in teachers more than male students do (Smith, Medendorp, Ranck, Morrison, and Kopfman, 1994). Further research is necessary to determine how significant these gender differences are. If gender differences are significant issues in students' perception of their teachers, these styles may have to be tailored more effectively along appropriate dimensions in schools that have different gender ratios to produce more effective learning.

As well as differences between schools, subjects, and gender, in some cases there are significant differences according to the age and grade of pupils- as they get older, different things are important to them. Although 'dresses up smartly' is fairly constant between all age groups, with other characteristics there is a much wider variation. For instance, '*is very rarely absent from lessons*' to 11 graders displays that it is not as much important as to 9 graders. This finding exhibits a great contradiction to the previous research. Similarly, the item '*knows their subject really well*' to 11 graders tends to ascend in year 10 ratings. Perhaps, this much discrepancy between these three grades seems to bare a great contradiction to the previously conducted studies, but we should make it clear that this study was done in Turkish setting.

### **Results of the Open-Ended Questions**

To Rallis (1994), open-ended questions allow the entire population of teachers in schools to see and benefit from the results of the survey. What he did was to gather pertinent information on students' perceptions of teachers' annoying teaching habits by simply asking students to write them down anonymously on an index card. Similarly, I asked three open-ended questions in order to illustrate the situation more concretely.

#### **Question 1: What most puts you off being in a classroom/learning a school subject?**

Pupils were asked to list the 2 factors that were most putting them off about being in a classroom/learning a school subject. Only the first and most common factors that the pupils noted were included.

<p><b>Male:</b></p> <p>Teachers not helping everybody equally. (Year 11).  The teacher. (Year 11).  Can be boring. (Year 9).  Teachers. (Year 9).  Miserable teachers who don't want to be there. (Year 11).  Strict, unpleasant, teacher. (Year 11).  Bad class atmosphere. (Year 9).  Teacher. (Year 9).  Sitting next to someone I don't know or like. (Year 10).  It's boring. (Year 10).  Sitting next to people I don't like. (Year 10).  Teachers I don't like. (Year 10).  A teacher in a bad mood. (Year 10).  Coldness. (Year 10).  If the teacher's not nice. (Year 9).  Teachers. (Year 11).  Teachers in school. (Year 10).  If the teachers or lesson subject is boring. (Year 9).  Strictness. (Year 10).  Not sitting next to a friend. (Year 10).  If the teacher is too strict. (Year 10).  Teacher not being kind. (Year 10).  Teachers not humorous. (Year 11).</p>	<p><b>Female:</b></p> <p>Boring teacher who is unfriendly. (Year 9).  Being under strict control. (Year 11).  Boring lessons. (Year 11).  Teacher continuously talking. (Year 9).  Working in silence. (Year 11).  Being treated like babies. (Year 11).  Being bored/find subject boring. (Year 9).  A grumpy teacher. (Year 11).  Working in silence. (Year 11).  The teacher being strict. (Year 11).  If students wear uniforms - so should teachers. (Year 11).  Not liking the teacher. (Year 10).  Being silent. (Year 9).  The teacher. (Year 10).  Not sitting with your friends. (Year 10).  A really horrible teacher. (Year 9).  If it is boring. (Year 10).  When teachers can't control the lesson. (Year 10).  The teachers hardly ever there. (Year 9).  Bad teacher. (Year 10).  A strict teacher who shouts if you get the answer wrong. (Year 9).  The teacher talking for the whole lesson. (Year 10).</p>
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**Question 2: What makes you feel OK about being in a classroom/learning a subject?**

Pupils were asked to list the 2 factors that were most putting them off about being in a classroom/learning a school subject. I have just noted the first and most common factors that the pupils noted.

<b>Male:</b>	<b>Female:</b>
<p>Positive teacher. (Year 11).          If the teacher controls all the pupils. (Year 9).          Fun and Humorous teacher. (Year 9).          Fun work. (Year 11).          A teacher that listens to you. (Year 9).          Mood of teacher. (Year 11). Not cold. (Year 10).          Nice quiet atmosphere. (Year 9).          Friendly teacher. (Year 11).          Interesting subject. (Year 9).          Happy, humorous, good teacher. (Year 11).          Sitting next to friends. (Year 11).          Being with friends. (Year 10).          Nice teachers. (Year 10).          Relaxed environment. (Year 10).          People I do like. (Year 10).          Being active. (Year 9).          Warmth. (Year 10).          Fun. (Year 11).          Nice teacher. (Year 9).          If I am among friends. (Year 9).          If the teacher isn't too strict. (Year 10).          Feeling secure with the teacher. (Year 10).</p>	<p>Good teacher. (Year 11).          Co-operative class. (Year 9).          Friendly interesting teachers. (Year 11).          Sitting next to friends. (Year 10).          Enjoyable to learn. (Year 9).          Having conversations with teacher. (Year 11).          Good/interesting teacher. (Year 9).          Nice quiet talking. (Year 11).          In trainers because my feet are comfy. (Year 11).          Having a good interesting teacher. (Year 11).          You don't have to work in complete silence. (Year 9).          Getting on with the teacher. (Year 9).          If I get on with the teacher. (Year 10).          Interesting teacher. (Year 10).          Sitting where you want. (Year 9).          Be allowed to talk with your friends. (Year 10).          A good, nice, happy teacher. (Year 10).          Knowing your friends are there. (Year 9).          Nice teacher. (Year 10).          Humor. (Year 10).          Humorous teacher who don't lose control. (Year 10).          Sitting with friends. (Year 9).</p>

**Question 3: Is there any other comment you would like to make about teachers, lessons and how you are taught at school in general?**

The percentage of students who answered this question was fairly low compared to the former two questions although I stated "do not leave any out" at the beginning of the questionnaire. There were a few indecent responses. But, it was apparent that for many, school and learning is very enjoyable and worthwhile.

- "It is generally great fun, interesting"
- "I'm taught well and enjoy most lessons."
- "It's brilliant and fantastic"
- "I think it's the greatest thing."
- "The school is good. The teachers are nice."

**There were a great number of pupils who wrote comments on their perceptions of their teachers' quality of life and their 'style'**



- "Teachers should try to be more relaxed and humorous."
- "Teachers are sad."
- "Teachers should relax more."
- "Teachers should have more off days."
- "Why are teachers so strange?"
- "Teachers should be friendlier." ( majority of the pupils)
- "Teachers shouldn't get so stressed."
- "Teachers should be paid more than they are now"
- "Teachers should have a sense of humor."

### **Pupils had suggestions for things in general:**

- "We are fed up with old teachers."
- "There should be a teacher training course which teaches teachers to be nice to us."
- "I think there should be younger teachers as they understand children more."
- "I think teachers should not shout and yell at us."
- "Some teachers lack expression and control so they can't control classes."
- "Teachers should be more interesting. They shouldn't walk around the class on all the time."
- "Teachers could make learning more fun by making use of technology and then it could be more enjoyable for us and them."
- "We want teachers who have a sense of humor and enough patience."
- "We really want to be relaxed in a classroom atmosphere."

### **Conclusion**

For many years, educators and researchers have debated which teacher-specific variables influence student motivation toward teachers and learning. A great deal of suggestions in this field has been made so as to reach at better educational settings. However, a cyclical process such as this, by nature, is to mean that findings of previous research only pave the way for further research and findings and since it is a collaborative process researchers are strictly attached to, the sole purpose turns out to generalize the results and argue for new methodology and suggestions in the field, which is only possible through a whole bunch of researchers' points of views.

Since classroom learning climate is an interaction phenomenon, it is of great importance that the developmental history of each member of the group, personality variables, cognitive variables, gender and age, and other variables which would seem to interact with the behaviors of the participants, including teachers, of a certain environment be taken into account. The content of this study aimed to investigate how influential the characteristics of teachers over students' attitudes towards their teachers as well as learning. It is proposed in this study that being fully equipped with pedagogical and professional characteristics would not be adequate to establish a positive, learnable, and teachable classroom climate. Besides, s/he should be aware of personal characteristics and how they are important to students if it is the optimal educational atmosphere a teacher wants to keep up with.

At the end of the analysis procedures, it was apparent that the participants of this study including 181 students totally from 9, 10, and 11 grades highly agreed with the objectives of this study. This study stemmed from a 'need' that although there were clearly 'subject' factors involved, we should bear in mind that 'school' factors, and 'teaching methods' factors and largely teachers' *'personal factors'* had an important influence on pupils' attitude toward learning. Indeed, when you look at the data gathered through all the sections, it is not difficult to conclude who the teacher is, and what they are like as a person are one of the most essential determinants on attitudes to learning for many pupils, i.e. the teacher as *'a rational human being'*, along with the teacher's technical or pedagogical competence.

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## Appendix A

### Instructions to the questionnaire

You will make us happier than ever before if you could answer the following questions. We are trying to find out what makes pupils want to learn, and what puts them off learning, which will, in the future, return to you as a beneficial feedback.

IT'S NOT A TEST. You don't need to write your name on it and nobody will ask you what and why you write. It will take less than 10 minutes to complete and will provide helpful information which we hope will help us enhance our lessons.

Please try to answer all of the questions and complete the questionnaire; and don't leave any out.

Please be as frank as possible.