

## Investigating students' conceptions about the characteristics of the effective teacher

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### Abstract

In this article, we report a quantitative study that investigated the conceptions of secondary school students with regard to the characteristics of the effective teacher. Our purpose was to obtain a profile of the effective teacher, focusing on three dimensions: (a) the interpersonal relationship between teachers and students, (b) the teacher's justice and impartiality, and (c) the teaching strategies that have a direct influence on enhancing student involvement and learning. The questionnaire was used as a research tool. The analysis of the data revealed that students consider justice, impartiality and the interpersonal relationship between teachers and students as important characteristics of the effective teacher, whereas the teaching strategies have less importance for them. In addition, it revealed statistically significant differences in the profile of the effective teacher with respect to the students' gender and grade and positive correlations between self-identified attainment, interpersonal relationships and teaching strategies. The students had the opportunity to express their views about the effective teacher and the teachers to improve their teaching practice and to gain a more complete picture of their students' expectations.

**Keywords:** Effective teacher; effective teaching.

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## 1. Introduction

Teachers must have a wide range of teaching skills to ensure that students learn effectively. To ensure effectiveness, they need to have knowledge of the learning content. Therefore, they must be educated in a system that gives them the ability to understand the nature of effective teaching, to develop skills and to evaluate the teaching outcomes.

Kyriacou (1997) points out that the importance of effective teaching lies in the teacher's ability to create all the appropriate conditions for learning. According to Kyriacou (1997), there are four factors that are considered important for learning: (a) the nature of learning, (b) the learning process, (c) student motivation and support, and (d) student involvement in learning. The teacher plays an important role in students' involvement in learning and is one of the basic factors of the effective school. According to Creemers (1994), the effective school is described as the school in which the effective teachers teach.

It is argued that the effective teacher should be friendly, capable of oral communication, enthusiastic and able to use modern learning tools (Cooper & McIntyre, 1996; Harris & Hill, 1982). In addition, it is argued that the teacher's fairness and impartiality, his/her communication skills, the interpersonal relationship with students, as well as the teaching techniques and strategies he/she uses, are important factors that affect students' performance (Kutnick & Jules, 1993; Newmann, 1992; Stronge, 2007, 2018; Sutcliff, 2011).

According to Harris and Hill (1982), the effective teacher should have the ability to communicate and use the ICT. Harslett, Harrison, Godfrey, Partington and Richer (2000) argue that the effective teachers motivate their students to learn and select methods and tasks according to the students' needs and interests. Pozo-Munoz, Reboloso-Pacheco, and Fernandez-Ramirez (2000) describe the effective teacher as the one who is polite, sensitive, understanding, self-controlled, able to listen to others, willing to give explanations and motivate students to participate in the learning process. Kutnick and Jules (1993) identified the characteristics of the effective teacher highlighting the teacher's ability to teach, the knowledge of the learning content and the organisation skills. Moreover, they placed emphasis on the interpersonal relationship between students and teacher and point out that a good teacher should help students by showing them understanding and patience (Tavoosy & Jelveh, 2019).

Stronge, Ward, Tucker and Hindman (2007) investigated teachers' behaviour in the classroom regarding the teaching practices they use during the lesson and tried to identify the best teaching practices that could enhance student's learning. Their research focused on identifying the successful teacher and led to four factors of effectiveness: (a) teaching, (b) student's evaluation, (c) classroom management and (d) personality. The findings revealed that the effective teachers had better organisational skills, their expectations about the students were greater and they were more respectful and fair.

Darling-Hammond (2000), Mendro (1998), Nye, Konstantopoulos and Hedges (2004), Stronge, Grant and Xu (2015) and Wright, Hornke and Sanders (1997) reinforced the role of the effective teacher as an important factor in student learning. Research has also focused on investigating the relationship between the teacher effectiveness and student performance. Factors such as the learning activities and the teaching style contribute to the approach of the effective teacher (Campbell, Kyriakides, Muijs & Robinson, 2003; Dunkin & Biddle, 1974; Kelkay & Endris, 2020).

According to Babbages (2002), the teachers who are capable of arousing the interest of the students, encouraging them and showing excitement in their teaching are considered effective. They are willing to work, learn new things and try new teaching methods and strategies to relate the content to real life (Sutcliff, 2011).

## **2. Method**

### **2.1. Purpose of the study**

In this article, a quantitative study is presented in which conceptions of secondary school students on the characteristics of the effective teacher are explored. In particular, the aim of this study is to obtain a profile of the effective teacher, focusing on three dimensions: (a) the interpersonal relationship between teachers and students, (b) the teacher's justice and impartiality, and (c) the teaching strategies that have a direct influence on enhancing student involvement and learning (Sutcliff, 2011). Moreover, quantitative statistics are applied to investigate whether there were statistically significant differences in the students' conceptions about the characteristics of the effective teacher with respect to the students' gender, grade and their self-identified attainment (Crafter & de Abreu, 2010).

#### **2.1.1. Research questions**

- What is the profile of the effective teacher according to the conceptions of secondary school students?
- What are the characteristics of the effective teacher focusing on the three dimensions?
- Are there statistically significant differences in the students' conceptions about the characteristics of the effective teacher with respect to the students' gender, grade and their self-identified attainment?

### **2.2. Participants**

The research was conducted during the academic year 2018–2019. One hundred and eighty-nine students of a Greek public high school in Athens participated in the research. The students were between 12 and 15 years old. Ninety-three of them were girls (49.2%) and 96 of them were boys (50.2%). Seventy-three students were from Grade A (38.6%), 61 students from Grade B (32.3%) and 55 students from Grade C (29.1%).

### **2.3. Research strategy**

A quantitative analysis of the data was conducted. The quantitative method was chosen for the study because it is a very useful method for describing and investigating the characteristics of the population under investigation (Paraskevopoulos, 1993). It is a very useful method when it is necessary to check specific research cases or questions and it is the most appropriate method for the investigation, the description and the explanation of the relationships between variables (Cohen, Manion & Morisson, 2008). The qualitative study was conducted for a better understating of participants' conceptions when investigating the characteristics of the effective teacher. A thematic analysis was conducted on the transcribed data (Creswell, 2000).

### **2.4. Procedure and data**

The data were analysed using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS 25). Data were collected in one phase for all the participants. The students had 15–20 minutes to complete the questionnaire. The questionnaire that was administered to the students included an adaptation of the instrument employed by Sutcliff (2011). It contained 40 questions. Thirty nine of them were closed-ended questions and one of them was an open-ended question. The questionnaire was divided into three parts: demographic information (Part A); interpersonal relationship between students and teacher, teacher's justice and impartiality, and teaching strategies (Part B); and self-identification about their school attainment (Part C). The research was conducted with students in only one school unit and with students in one specific geographical area. The findings may to some extent reflect on students' views.

### 3. Results

As far as the first research question is concerned, the quantitative analysis of the data revealed a statistically significant higher value of all the three dimensions than conceptually neutral. Therefore, all the three dimensions formed the profile of the effective teacher.

**Table 1. Interpersonal relationship between students and teachers, teaching strategies, justice and impartiality**

|  | <i>M</i> | <i>Mdn</i> | <i>P</i> |
|--|----------|------------|----------|
| Interpersonal relationship between students and teachers | 3.8      | 3.9        | <0.001   |
| Teaching Strategies                                      | 3.4      | 3.5        | <0.001   |
| Justice and Impartiality                                 | 4.1      | 4.2        | <0.001   |

One-sample Wilcoxon signed test was used to investigate the statistically significant deviation from the conceptually neutral '3'.

The dimension 'interpersonal relationship between students and the teacher' was measured with 10 sentences. Nine sentences statistically significantly deviated from the conceptually neutral and formed the profile of the effective teacher. The dimension 'justice and impartiality' was measured by six sentences. All the six sentences showed statistically significant differences from the conceptually neutral, forming the profile of the effective teacher. The dimension 'teaching strategies' was measured with 23 sentences. Four sentences did not deviate statistically significantly from the conceptually neutral, so they did not affect the profile of the effective teacher with respect to this dimension.

As far as the students' conceptions with regard to the characteristics of the effective teacher with respect to the students' gender are concerned that the analysis revealed a higher level of conceptions of the girls than the boys, regarding the three dimensions of effectiveness (Table 2).

**Table 2. The difference of the effectiveness with respect to the students' gender**

|  | Female   |            | Male     |            | <i>p</i> | <i>U</i> |
|--|----------|------------|----------|------------|----------|----------|
|  | <i>M</i> | <i>Mdn</i> | <i>M</i> | <i>Mdn</i> |          |          |
| Interpersonal relationship between teachers and students | 4.0      | 4.1        | 3.6      | 3.7        | <0.001   | 2,947.5  |
| Teaching strategies                                      | 3.6      | 3.6        | 3.3      | 3.3        | <0.001   | 3,065.0  |
| Justice and impartiality                                 | 4.3      | 4.3        | 3.8      | 4.0        | <0.001   | 2,891.0  |

The girls seemed to perceive the three dimensions of effectiveness as more important than boys, preferring justice and impartiality and the interpersonal relationship between teachers and students. The teaching strategies come second. The same distribution is also observed in boys, but in lower values. This could be explained by the fact that boys see the teacher from another perspective (Table 2).

As far as the students' conceptions with regard to the characteristics of the effective teacher with respect to the students' grade are concerned, the analysis revealed statistically significant differences regarding the teaching strategies dimension. It can be argued that there was a different profile of the effective teacher comparing grades A and B (Table 3).

**Table 3. The difference of the effectiveness with respect to the student's grade**

|  | Grade    |            |          |            |          |            | <i>p</i> |
|--|----------|------------|----------|------------|----------|------------|----------|
|  | A        |            | B        |            | Γ        |            |          |
|  | <i>M</i> | <i>Mdn</i> | <i>M</i> | <i>Mdn</i> | <i>M</i> | <i>Mdn</i> |          |
| Interpersonal relationship between teachers and students | 3.9      | 3.9        | 3.6      | 3.7        | 3.9      | 4.0        | 0.085    |
| Teaching strategies                                      | 3.5      | 3.6        | 3.3      | 3.3        | 3.5      | 3.6        | 0.030    |

Table 4. Findings regarding the difference of the effectiveness with respect to the self-identified attainment

| Sample1-Sample2 | Test Statistic | Std. Error | Std. Test Statistic | Sig. | Adj.Sig. |
|-----------------|----------------|------------|---------------------|------|----------|
| B-Γ             | -20.886        | 9.992      | -2.090              | .037 | .110     |
| B-A             | 23.100         | 9.417      | 2.453               | .014 | .042     |
| Γ-A             | 2.214          | 9.644      | .230                | .818 | 1.000    |

  

|  | Interpersonal relationship between students and teachers | Teaching Strategies | Justice and impartiality |
|--|--|---------------------|--------------------------|
| How good a student do you consider yourself? | $r$ 0.126*<br>$p$ 0.029                                  | 0.166**<br>0.004    | 0.062<br>0.290           |

The analysis revealed a significant positive correlation of students' self-identified attainment with respect to the two dimensions of effectiveness: (a) the interpersonal relationship between students and teachers and (b) the teaching strategies (Table 4).

Sixty-three students out of 189 answered the following open-ended question: 'Are there any characteristics of the effective teacher you would like to add?' The open-ended question reinforced the existing themes and highlighted new dimensions and categories of the effective teacher, such as classroom management: discipline and limits, time management and the learning environment, which should be positive and supportive (Bhuyan & Tamir, 2020). Moreover, the following dimensions: teacher's organisation and presentation skills, teacher's personality, communicative skills and teacher's pedagogical role were pointed out by the students. Eight students linked teacher's effectiveness to discipline and stressed: 'He/She must be strict when it is necessary'. Eight students pointed out the importance of a calm, positive and supportive environment '...we would like to have the chance to discuss without feeling embarrassed or anxious of what we think and say'. Thirteen students mentioned organisation and presentation skills as important skills of the effective teacher 'She teaches in a very pleasant way', '...the lesson should be comprehensible to the students.'. Seven students stressed on the pedagogical role of the teachers 'The teacher should devote time advising us on our behaviour in our daily lives or at school' '... to discuss issues that we are interested in'.

#### 4. Discussion

Based on the results of this study, in terms of the profile of the effective teacher, students favour justice and fairness, as well as the relationship between the students and the teacher, whereas teaching strategies come second. In addition, the research showed a qualitatively different profile of the effective teacher with respect to gender. The same difference was revealed comparing grade A and grade B. Meanwhile, there was a significant positive correlation of students' self-identification of their attainment with respect to the relationship between the students and the teacher and the teaching strategies.

The results of this study are in line with different previous research studies. Research examining students' conceptions of the characteristics of the effective teacher places emphasis on the teacher's teaching skills, such as organisation and classroom management and the interpersonal relationship between teacher and students (Kutnick & Jules, 1993; Stronge, 2018).

According to the results, the effective teacher does not jump to conclusions about the naughty students easily, does not discriminate against students with poor performance and is impartial with everyone. Moreover, the students admire the teacher who is fair, especially when he/she uses

methods of evaluation, treats them with dignity and respect, appreciates them and does not make inappropriate comments in the classroom. Therefore, research has shown that effective teachers display fairness, impartiality, respect and equitable treatment of all students (Bondy, Ross, Hambacher & Acosta, 2013; Stronge, 2018; Stronge, Ward & Grant, 2011; Suldo et al., 2009; Williams, Sullivan & Kohn 2012). The effective teacher can stimulate, direct and pace interactions with the class, encourages independent thinking, accepts criticism, uses humour effectively, is a good public speaker, knows whether or not the class is following the material and is concerned about the quality of his/her teaching (Hildebrand, Wilson & Dienst, 1971).

The results of the study indicate that the students consider the interpersonal relationship between students and teacher as an important characteristic of the effective teacher. The open-ended question revealed some extra characteristics of the effective teacher. They highlighted the characteristics of the teacher's effectiveness, such as the good relationship with the teacher, his/her interest in their feelings, trust, communication and the opportunities provided to discuss with him/her on how they can improve. McKnight, Graybeal, Yarbrow, and Graybeal (2016) state the importance of the teacher's ability is to develop a trusting relationship with students, to show patience and care for student needs. According to Koutrouba (2012), the trust between teachers and students motivates learning and enhances the quality of teaching and learning. Uslu and Gizir (2017) point out that the interaction between students, teachers and their peers influences their sense of 'belonging' to the group, helps them to engage themselves in learning and enhances academic motivation and learning (Corso, Bundick, Quaglia & Haywood, 2013; Wentzel, 2000). A positive interpersonal relationship with teachers reinforces student involvement in learning, their motivations, their sense of 'belonging to the group' and their effort to achieve the task (Goodenow, 1993; Sullivan, Riceio & Reynolds, 2008; Wentzel, 1998, 2000).

The results indicate that the students consider justice and impartiality as important characteristics of the effective teacher. Stronge (2007, 2018) claims that the effective teacher tries to build a trusting relationship with the students, shows credibility and gives emphasis on justice and respect. The students consider these two characteristics a prerequisite for effective teaching and they underscore the value of fairness for all students (Osterman, 2010; Watson, Miller, Davis & Carter, 2010).

The students believe that teachers must use teaching strategies, although this is less important for them. Students agree that the effective teacher helps them to build knowledge, uses examples, details, analogies, metaphors and a variety in modes of explanation to make material not only memorable but understandable, is well prepared, asks questions, gives enough time for taking notes, encourages participation, promotes self-evaluation and peer review evaluation, gives feedback, has time management skills, uses criteria for evaluating, connects the concepts to the real world and encourages independent thinking and accepts criticism.

The analysis of the open-ended question revealed the need for differentiated teaching, as the same teaching method or teaching approach is in no way appropriate for all students (Harslett et al., 2000; Stronge, 2018). The effective teachers are concerned good teachers about the quality of their teaching and use a variety of teaching strategies, which are one of the most important characteristics of effective teacher (Brophy & Good, 1986; Pentimonti et al., 2017; Rosenshine, 2012; Stronge, 2018). It is important to mention that time management is also an important factor for the student involvement in the learning process according to the literature (Gettinger & Walter, 2012; Walberg, 1984). It is found that in classrooms where teaching time is sufficient, student performance increases (Stronge et al., 2011; Walberg, 1984). With regard to organisation and presentation skills, the students consider communicative skills as interesting and appealing skills as the other characteristics of the effective teacher, findings that are in line with international research (Patrick & Smart, 1998).

The girls seemed to consider the three dimensions of effectiveness as more important than the boys. Both of them appreciate the care of teachers for them. However, the girls considered teachers' academic behaviour as more important, whereas the boys focused on the interpersonal relationship

(Tosolt, 2010). This can be explained by the fact that boys consider teachers less approachable than girls (Hughes & Kwok, 2007).

Finally, the analysis of the data showed statistically significant differences in the dimension 'teaching strategies' with respect to the students' grade. Specifically, grade A considers this dimension more important than grade B. As far as the students' self-identified attainment is concerned, there were significant positive correlations with the interpersonal relationship between teacher and students as well as with the teaching strategies. The findings of this research are not in agreement with other researches. Rosenshine and Furst (1973) found out that younger children give importance to a person's physical characteristics and appearance, whereas adults focused on his/her personality. In this research, the students of grade A included the appearance of the teacher in the characteristics of an effective teacher. In addition, according to Kutnick and Jules (1993), students aged between 11 and 13 years consider the traditional teacher as a good teacher, whereas the 16-year-olds would 'elect' as a teacher the one who is professional and has teaching skills (Hopf & Xohellis, 2003).

## 5. Conclusion and recommendations

As the research on the secondary school students' conceptions of the effective teacher in Greece is limited, the significance of this study lies in the fact that students are given the opportunity to present their views on a topic that is essential to them. However, this knowledge could help teachers improve their teaching practices and gain a more complete insight of their students' expectations. Furthermore, due to validity and reliability considerations, further research with a larger sample of a variety of quantitative characteristics in different geographical areas should be conducted. In addition, it is suggested that the interview should be used as a research tool so as to be focus on the necessity of the teaching strategies and their advantages, as well as the dimensions that have been revealed through the research, such as classroom management, time management, the learning environment, organisation and presentation skills, professionalism and the pedagogical role of the teacher.

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