Full Length Research Paper

Pupils’ voice: "My primary school teacher”

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This study aims to explore pupils’ views on how a teacher should be and the reasons for their decisions. Based on qualitative research design, focus group interviews were done with ten 5th graders from a public primary school in Turkey. These pupils were asked the following questions: ‘how do you think a teacher should be?’ and ‘why do you make these decisions?’ Six themes were derived from the data: teacher’s personality, teacher’s interaction with pupils, teacher’s teaching skills, teachers’ classroom management skills, teacher’s interaction with parents and teacher’s appearance. Pupils defined teachers’ personality characteristics as friendly, caring, helpful, kind, respectful, energetic, creative, humorous and sympathetic. The results showed that pupils expected a teacher to have positive relationships with them and with their parents. The former was related to the support at school and the latter was related to support at home. Additionally, a teacher using diverse activities and technology to promote interest and engagement was expected. The results imply that to help teachers in improving their skills, competencies and knowledge, pupils’ views should be evaluated. The findings of this study contribute to knowledge in defining ‘a teacher’.

Key words: Pupils’ voice, teacher, primary school, teaching skills, focus group.

INTRODUCTION

It is widely acknowledged that a teacher is a significant component of an education. Stronge (2006) emphasized that “the core of education is teaching and learning, and the connection of teaching and learning works best when we have effective teachers working with students everyday” (p.1). The teacher and the pupil work together in the classroom setting and it is indisputable that teachers carry crucial responsibilities in their classrooms. Mainly, pupils depend on teachers as long as everything the teacher says or does will have an impact on the pupil. Therefore, classroom environment created by teachers, their instructional methods and significantly the relationships between pupils and teachers are determining factors in the quality of pupils’ schooling.

The relationships between teachers and pupils play a crucial role in pupils’ achievement (Wentzel, 1997). Thus, the single most important factor affecting pupils’ achievement is their teachers (Darling-Hammond, 2000; Goldhaber, 2007; Hanushek et al., 2005; Hare, 1995; King-Rice, 2003; Parsley and Corcoran, 2003; Rivkin et al., 2005; Rockoff, 2004; Sanders, 1998; Smith, 2008). This means the quality of the teacher is a strong predictor of pupils’ learning, which in turn affects their performance during schooling.

A teacher “establishes control and does things right” during the teaching process (Wong and Wong, 1991, p.8). Thus, a teacher designs a lesson for pupils and brings its expectations for them. On the other hand, Benard (2004) described a teacher as the person who is a role model that influences a pupil socially and emotionally. In this regard, it can be said that teachers do not only have the role of instructing. Considering the importance of a teacher, it is seen that many studies, conducted with different samples from primary schools.
to universities, aim to determine the characteristics of teachers who teach in primary schools, high schools and universities (Aagaard and Skidmore, 2002; Cabello and Terrell, 1994; Crow, 2004; Çelikten and Can, 2003; Çermik, 2011; Çetin, 2001; Eren and Tekinarslan, 2013; Ferlazzo, 2012; Glen, 2001; Howard, 2002; Mergendoller and Packer, 1985; Minor et al., 2002; Ng et al., 2010; Palmer, 1997; Polk, 2006; Pozo-Munoz et al., 2000; Salehi, 2010; Telli et al., 2008; Ubuł and Sari, 2009; Weinstein, 1983; Whitney et al., 2006; Yilmaz, 2011). The results of these mentioned studies revealed that a teacher was defined under the personality theme as follows: nice, warm, happy, friendly and makes learning to be fun; teaches very well, organized, encourages class discussion, enables one to think; has good student-teacher relationship, positive, easy to talk to, treats pupils equally, manages classroom well and makes environment safe, supportive, motivates and disciplines effectively and gives reward for positive reactions.

In a study on effective teachers' qualities, Glenn (2001) presented a list of teachers' characteristics as being enthusiastic and making learning to be fun, organized, actively involved in the learning process, portraying a positive attitude, having successful classroom management, communicating clearly, differentiating instruction and being flexible. In another study on teacher's qualities based on primary school pupils' views from 50 different countries, it was found that a teacher is a person who is friendly, a positive role model, not strict, loves teaching and all students, treats them equally and helps them to think and achieve their goals (Khawajkie et al., 1996).

Furthermore, Stronge (2002) emphasized that a teacher should have the following qualities:

a) be caring
b) understanding
c) knowing his/her students
d) promoting enthusiasm and motivation for learning
e) having a dual commitment to personal and students' learning
f) having a consistent, proactive discipline as the major crux of effective classroom management
g) applying the elements of organization
h) organizing instruction in such a manner that allocates the needed time for learning as the central purpose of educational productivity
i) communicating high expectations for all students
j) understanding the complexity of teaching as reflective of his/her practice and knowing how to keep students engaged (p.25-44).

Making the characterization of a teacher depends on whom you are asking. Thus, it is obvious that teachers, directors, policymakers, students and parents provide their own views on who they consider is a teacher or what they consider as qualities of a teacher. According to Stronge (2006), "students as direct recipients of the teaching-learning process, are the major clients of teachers; they are in the key position to provide information about teachers' effectiveness" (p 137). Furthermore, Kyriacou (1983) and Omotani and Omotani (1996) agreed that primary school pupils can comprehend what teaching is and their voices can be helpful to teachers in heightening their effectiveness.

As mentioned earlier, the wide body of research focussed on finding out qualities of teachers. Considering the context, it can be said that there were very limited studies done in Turkey in trying to find out teachers' characteristics. Even though these studies collected the data with different tools, their sampling mostly consisted of students from universities (Çermik, 2011; Çetin, 2001; Eren and Tekinarslan, 2013; Ubuł and Sari, 2009; Yilmaz, 2011) and from high schools (Telli et al., 2008). The other study, which is examined by Çelikten and Can (2003), was conducted with teachers, directors and parents. That is, there is a need to conduct study with a sample of pupils in Turkish context.

It is significant to listen to pupils' voice as they could offer insights relating to teachers' inadequacies in a classroom setting. It should be noted that pupils' voice is not simply talking since pupils are stakeholders in teaching and learning process. In other words, it could not be said that pupils are only passive recipients in the classroom setting. They are also individuals who have ability to understand, reflect and give suitable reactions. In this regard, this study was conducted to listen to pupils' voices about how they define and determine a teacher by using focus group interviews. As suggested by Fielding (2004), it is crucial to understand and respect pupils' views about issues in classroom setting.

In given studies, it was understood that most of the researchers used such terms as 'effective', 'good' or 'ideal' to identify the teacher. However, in this study, these terms were avoided as pupils could have difficulties to distinguish them due to their ages. Although the data were collected from pupils in some of the given studies, this study tried to make additional contribution to existing studies. Another contribution of this study can be to provide teachers with some feedbacks so that they can reassess their personalities, teaching styles and strategies.

METHODOLOGY

In order to explore pupils' views about the characterization of 'a teacher', a qualitative research design was employed. Qualitative research emphasizes constructed realities and situations that form the process (Denzin and Lincoln, 2000). With this design, the author was prepared to sacrifice scope for details (Silverman, 2005, p. 9). In other words, this design enhanced comprehensive understanding of what is being studied, 'how pupils define and determine a teacher'.

Sampling

This study lended itself to constructivist paradigm; therefore, the
knowledge is constructed by pupils based on their interpretations of
the construction. With the aim of getting pupils' understandings and
interpretations about 'a teacher' led to the use of purposive
sampling in this study. "Purposive sampling is based on the
assumption that the investigator wants to discover, understand, and
gain insight and therefore must select a sample from which most
can be learned" (Merriam, 1998, p. 61).
Patton (2002) stated "qualitative inquiry typically focuses in depth
on relatively small samples [...] selected purposefully" (p.230). The
pupils in the sample were selected due to the following criteria: they
were at 5th grade of a primary school in Denizli, a city of Turkey,
showed willingness to participate in the study and were able to
present honest and critical views about 'a teacher'. Based on this
sampling criteria, ten pupils (five girls and five boys), who were
eleven years old from a public primary school, were involved in this
study. Thus, the number of the pupils is less important than the
criteria used to select them.

Before the data collection, permission was obtained from the
school director in order to conduct the study and access the site
(Creswell, 2003). The director suggested one of the 5th grades in
which pupils were believed to be helpful for the study. Although the
classroom teacher nominated the pupils to participate in the study,
the selection of the sample was done based on the willingness of
the pupils to be involved in this study. Also, permission forms
signed by their parents were returned to the researcher after
explaining the possible benefits of the study to them through phone
conversation. Both parents and pupils were guaranteed anonymity.

Data collection
The research question and the method used to answer it led to the
collection of the data by focus group interviews. The pupils were
asked the following questions: 'how do you think a teacher should be?' and 'why do you make these decisions?' Focus group
interviews support interaction within the group and allow
participants to negotiate about the topic in details (Morgan, 1997). A
pilot focus group interview was done before the actual session
which also supported the reliability of the study. This data collection
tool enabled pupils to bring out immediate reactions, beliefs and
ideas, and also enabled them to ask each other questions based on
their experiences and expectations. Therefore, information gained
through focus group tends to be comprehensive and multi-
dimensional and of high face validity.
During the session it was noticed that the atmosphere created by
focus group interview allowed the flow of ideas as well as re-
evaluation and re-consideration of pupils' understandings.
Additionally, even though in some cases it was difficult to do, the
researcher as a moderator tried to keep the discussion on track
without inhibiting the flow of ideas and comments. For example,
while drawing the teacher, pupils talked about their teachers at
school and compared the teacher they were identifying with them
intermittently. The accurate results gathered from the study
represent the views of pupils about the teacher which in turn
supports the internal validity (Verma and Mallick, 1999).

Data analysis
The focus group interviews were audio recorded to facilitate data
analysis. The inductive analysis for this study was situated within an
interpretivist paradigm. This paradigm is based on the notion that
reality is socially constructed and that the purpose of research is to
reflect understanding of a phenomenon, 'a teacher' from pupils' viewpoint (Mason, 1996).

Firstly, all the recorded data were transcribed and then coded.
The process used in this coding was to review the transcripts as
many times in order to put them into meaningful categories for
interpretation. Coding process enhanced building up of themes
based on pupils' similar views and their identification of the
phenomenon inductively.

RESULTS
The pupils determined and described how a teacher should be, his qualities, appearance and possible impacts in details. The results are summarised within the themes of teacher's personality, teacher's interaction with pupils, teacher's teaching skills, teachers' classroom management skills, teacher's interaction with parents and teacher's appearance. The quotations which will be used throughout the data presentation are coded as 'G' for girls and 'B' for boys along with numbers from 1 to 5 for each.

Teachers' personality
In terms of personal qualities of a teacher, pupils mostly
said that a teacher should be like a mother. For instance,
a teacher is like a mother" (G2) "[...] because we spend
much of our time with her. So a teacher should be close
to us" (B4). The results indicated that pupils draw a
teacher on the basis of sex and most of them prefer
female. However, two girls also emphasized that a
teacher could be like a mother or a father since the
significant point for them was teachers being protective
and caring.

On the other hand, one boy disagreed with their friends
using the term 'mother' for a teacher. He mentioned "[...] actually mother is not a right term to use for someone,
part apart from a real mother. For example, mum also says a
teacher is your mother. Okay, if she is my mother why
doesn't she come to our house? This isn't logical to me
[..]" (B1). Thus, for this pupil, rather than calling teachers
as 'mother', he preferred calling them as 'caring persons'.
Pupils stated that a teacher should be friendly, caring, helpful, kind and respectful. Examples for these
descriptors are:

"Teacher with smiling face" (B5)
"If a teacher is sulky looking, to me, this means she gets
angry with you or she doesn't want to talk with us" (G3)
"I'd like to talk safely with my teacher, for example I'd like
to share my problems with a teacher" (B3)
"[..] as pupils we can think, do something; I mean we
aren't only children; so teachers should consider we are
people [..]" (G4).

Other suggested personal qualities for a teacher include
being:
Energetic "slow and inactive teacher's lesson is always
boring" (B2)
Humorous “teacher who can laugh to jokes and make jokes is good” (B3)
Creative “we can use internet so a teacher should do more than us. We have different ideas so a teacher should have more, for example, or produce better ideas compared to a pupil” (G1)

Sympathetic “main problem between pupils and teachers is that teachers sometimes don’t understand pupils. But they have to understand pupils’ concerns or questions” (B5)

A teacher’s interaction with pupils
Pupils said that they spend much of their day at school interacting with teachers; therefore there should be a positive relationships among them. Additionally, considering such factors related to teachers’ personalities, pupils agreed that teachers’ positive personal traits were more related to their creating positive learning environment. Moreover, they emphasized that teachers’ interacting type with pupils contributed to their learning, which in turn their achievement. For instance;

“Teachers should know their power. For example, I don’t like maths, because of my teacher. She isn’t warm to me” (G2)
“Teachers should be talkative, understanding [...] they have to listen to pupils” (B4)
“If a teacher builds a good interaction with pupils, this means there is a real family in that classroom” (G1)

Some of the pupils emphasized that a teacher should listen to them carefully, and be helpful when they ask questions. They also emphasized that a teacher should be friendly and enable pupils to share their problems. According to pupils, a teacher should be available and accessible whenever needed.

“I had a problem with X (a friend of this participant in the classroom). The teacher gave us a project; we didn’t do it. Because we didn’t gather together so we couldn’t negotiate. If I had a chance to talk with my teacher I could have said this problem and maybe got a high mark from the project or maybe we could have been talking with X” (G5).

On the other hand, pupils agreed that teachers should avoid treating pupils differently. The results indicated that inequitable behaviours of teachers could diminish pupils’ achievement. Therefore, a fair-minded teacher could be an expected one. Comments of pupils are follows:

“[…] Teacher should treat each pupil in the same way. I know that some of you hate me or feel sad when teacher is interested in me. [...] I guess this because the teacher knows my parents as they are also teachers. I don’t like this […] I’d like a teacher having close relationship with all.” (B1)
“I believe that the teacher loves some pupils more than others. For example, the teacher doesn’t love me as the teacher never asks me whether I understand the lesson, or smiles withme. Teachers should love everyone and treat them the same way” (G4).

The results also suggested that teachers should communicate with pupils effectively, so they could be understood by pupils. In addition to this, teachers need to be aware of their reactions and words. Pupils said that teachers’ verbal and non-verbal languages should be in the same way. In other words, pupils emphasized that some teachers’ faces show that they are happy whereas their words say they would get angry with you. For instance;

“Can you imagine a teacher with a high volume voice and shouting at you and smiling as well. What can you think about the situation? Is it negative or positive? Of course, something is wrong [...] a teacher should be understood by us” (B5).

Teachers’ teaching skills
The results showed that pupils want a teacher that arouses pupils’ interests in the lesson and involves them in the activities of the class. According to the results, it was seen that pupils had an idea that teachers taught the lesson to some of the pupils in the class. Thus, teachers forgot the others who were not involved in the activities. Therefore, all pupils emphasized that teachers should teach all pupils in the class rather than focusing on those who were already involved in the activities of the class. For example;

“If a teacher talks only to one of us during the lesson, we can reject.” (G3) “A teacher does not belong to only half of the class [...] all pupils need a teacher” (B1)
“If I was a teacher, for example, I would engage pupils in the activities” (B5)

Pupils suggested that teachers need to control their speed when speaking since they cannot catch what is being said and follow the lesson. The results also indicated that a teacher should monitor whether pupils understand the topic. Additionally, it was suggested that a teacher should repeat the topic whenever needed. Furthermore, pupils stated that a teacher needs to avoid inducing disinterest.

The results indicated that pupils talked more about teachers’ teaching methods and their styles. 8 of the pupils complained about teachers using questions as a tool to appraise them and using pupils’ mistakes to show
power over them. They consciously agreed that questions are good for evaluating lessons; however, they mentioned that hearing such comments as ‘wrong’ or ‘sit down’ after making mistakes was unreasonable. Therefore, pupils expected teachers to be positive, helpful and review lessons after noticing any mistakes.

Additionally, pupils stated that every day they are together with their teachers; this means that teachers could know what is wrong with pupils. Therefore, as suggested a teacher should comprehend the reason why a pupil is making a mistake or why a pupil did not do his homework. For example pupils said:

“I always do my homework. [...] If I don’t do it one day, my teacher should think that I have a problem” (B2)

“When a pupil couldn’t answer a question or a problem, the teacher should see the difficulty that the pupil has. So teacher should help a pupil to fully understand” (G3)

“Teachers’ duties shouldn’t solely be catching pupils’ mistakes. Pupils can make a mistake because of not knowing or of not remembering the answer at that time [...]” (G1)

The results showed that pupils disliked homework given every day. They expect the teacher to do repetition at the end of each lesson rather than giving homework. It was also found that pupils preferred teachers to use teaching methods that are exciting, as well as using games, technology and allowing pupils to work together. The most prevalent view throughout the comments of the pupils includes teachers knowing how to use technology and how to integrate teaching with technology. Furthermore, pupils believe that they could learn whatever they want through Google or similar tools. Therefore, they believe that a teacher should give more information compared to Google and should present knowledge effectively. Some quotations from pupils’ conversations are as follows:

“Teachers can make the lesson attractive. For example, by using games [...]” (B4)

“We use technology everyday, so teacher can use it. [...] During the lesson a teacher can use different technological tools” (B1)

“Teachers should give pupils chance to work together” (G3)

“Working together is good, but not a simple group work like gathering together to do something and going back.” (G1)

“Can you imagine a teacher failing in using power point?” (B5)

“Can’t we google such topics? We can. [...] if a teacher is a teacher, he should do more than google” (B3)

**Teachers’ classroom management skills**

Pupils commented that “we have to feel that we are in a supportive place”. The results showed that pupils believe that communication between teachers and pupils could be helpful in motivating them. Therefore, building effective communication is suggested as well supporting motivation of pupils. A pupil said “[...] fair-minded teacher can provide positive classroom climate” (B2); another one suggested “positive climate is the first step of motivation” (G1)

According to the results, it can be said that pupils were happy to have enough discipline in the classroom as well as teachers controlling them. They emphasized that these resulted from their positive relationships with teachers. The results indicated that building this association could be helpful for teachers to support pupils’ involvement in the lesson which in turn affects their learning.

On the other hand, pupils argued about the type of punishments a teacher uses in the class. For example one of the pupil said, “[...] when Y (a friend of theirs) does something wrong, why does our teacher punish all of us?” (G3). Another pupil said, “I hate when the teacher punishes me by asking me to buy cakes for the next lesson.” (B4). The other girl emphasized, “the teacher actuallypunishes our parents, not us. But it’s not good to ask parents to buy some cakes or cookies for the next lesson” (G5).

**Teachers’ interaction with parents**

The results showed that pupils suggested that positive and continuously interaction with parents enable them to be more involved in school activities. According to pupils, teachers and parents should have visits outside the school in order to create warm relationship. It was also suggested that parents’ and teachers’ interaction could change pupils’ progresses, positively or negatively. For example;

“Teachers shouldn’t call parents just for telling them our grades” (B3)

“Teachers always ask pupils to study more but they have to give suggestions to our parents to help us” (G5)

On the other hand, the results indicated that when parents could not attend the meeting with teachers, it was assumed that parents did not pay attention to pupils’ progresses. However, it was seen throughout pupils’ views that parents could sometimes have some urgent duties, and could have reasonable excuses for not attending. Therefore, it was suggested that a teacher should appraise this situation from a right perspective. Moreover, the results showed that apart from conventional ways of arranging a meeting each term, teachers need to use other communication tools as phones and emails to connect with parents if the aim is to improve pupils’ progresses.
Teachers’ appearance

Pupils commented that teachers should be well-dressed. A pupil suggested that “a teacher should dress appropriately and be well-groomed” (G2), because as suggested by another pupil, “teachers are role models in the society; so they should be good examples” (B5). The results indicated that even if the teacher is female or male, a teacher should pay attention to dressing, appearance and hair style. On the other hand, quite a number of pupils stated that a teacher should be beautiful or handsome. The reason is being beautiful or handsome make teachers to have pleasant appearances.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Teachers retain the primary role in teaching and learning process. During this process, students are always studying their teachers. The way pupils perceive the teacher is significant; when a pupil believes and perceives that a teacher is treating all pupils equally and has positive interaction with them, he could be more successful throughout the process. As suggested by wide body of studies, the relationships between pupils and teachers influences pupils’ performance and achievement (Darling-Hammond, 2000; Goldhaber, 2007; Hanushek, et al., 2005; Hare, 1995; King-Rice, 2003; Parsley and Corcoran, 2003; Rivkin et al., 2005; Rockoff, 2004; Sanders, 1998; Smith, 2008). That is, a teacher is not simply a person giving instruction but also a person that affects pupils’ development.

Considering the classroom setting as well as being a stakeholder, pupils have also the right to say or to share their views about such issues happening in the setting, since, they have lots of opinions despite their age. To this view, this study aims to explore pupils’ views about how a teacher should be and the reasons of their decisions. In order to get fruitful information about characteristics of a teacher, a qualitative research design was used and focus group interviews were employed to ten 5th graders from a public primary school. Using focus groups enabled pupils to generate their own ideas. The pupils determined and described how a teacher should be, his qualities, appearance and his impacts on them in details. From the qualitative data, six themes were identified: teacher’s personality, teacher’s interaction with pupils, teacher’s teaching skills, teachers’ classroom management skills, teacher’s interaction with parents and teacher’s appearance.

Pupils defined teacher’s personality characteristics as friendly, caring, helpful, kind, respectful, energetic, creative, humorous, and sympathetic. These findings suggest that pupils want a teacher who helps them in meaningful ways along with protecting and listening to them. Most of these findings are nearly in line with the previous studies (Cook-Sather, 2002; Çermik, 2011; Ubuz and Sari, 2009; Weinstein, 1983; Whitney et al., 2006). The results showed that pupils described the teacher as a mother. This shows that pupils underline the figure of a teacher as a female. It could be related to the mother’s role in Turkish context as caring, protecting, listening and helpful.

The results indicated that pupils emphasized positive relationships with teachers. According to the results, a teacher should be friendly, helpful, understanding, accessible and fair-minded. This study correlates with the previous studies that refer to traits such as being helpful, encouraging (Certo et al., 2008), friendly and supportive (Weinstein, 1983), fair, easy to talk to and creator of good environment (Cabello and Terrell, 1994). The results suggest pupils need emotional and motivational support in the classroom setting both in feeling positive atmosphere and in feeling being supported by a teacher. Therefore, it is significant for teachers to provide positive and supportive atmosphere in the classroom. It was noticed that pupils used the terminology of the family in describing both the teacher and the classroom atmosphere. In fact, a teacher’s parental role and teachers providing a family atmosphere are underlined strongly.

In terms of teaching skills, pupils expect a teacher to use diverse activities in order to promote pupils’ interest and engagement. Teachers using encouraging words rather than using discouraging words are preferred. The findings of this study are in line with the previous studies done by Glen (2001), Khawajkie et al. (1999) and Stronge (2002). Pupils also emphasized that teachers should have technology literacy and ability to use technology effectively. On the other hand, pupils focused on the use of homework and allowing them work cooperatively. The results overwhelmingly show that teacher should be careful not to assign a pupil an abundance of homework. A suggestion derived from pupils’ comments can be made as a teacher can allow study halls or time in the class to review and repeat along with promoting pupils’ cooperation.

It was also found that a teacher should have a relationship with parents in order to support pupils’ learning by not only arranging meetings but also use such ways as phone, emails and visits. It seems that teachers having communication with parents can provide effective support for pupils, which in turn may affect their performance. On the other hand, pupils’ views indicated that they prefer a teacher paying attention to appearance. This suggests that pupils consider a teacher as a role model and to them role model should be well-dressed and be different from others.

The summary of the results indicates that pupils’ views are nearly similar to those done with students at both primary and higher level of schools in given previous studies. Considering the age of pupils, it seems that they are getting more intellectual to provide teachers with many clearly distinct characteristics. This may be due to
their ability to google whatever they want as emphasized by them or their awareness of being stakeholders in the process. The results imply that in order to help teachers to improve their skills, competencies and knowledge, pupils’ views should be evaluated.

In conclusion, this qualitative study was conducted with the sample of 11 years old pupils. The findings of this study contribute to knowledge in defining ‘a teacher’ based on pupils’ experience and expectations. In Turkish context, there is need to conduct similar studies with different samples to researchers to draw an understanding of teachers in order to facilitate teacher’s discussion, nationally and globally. In addition to this, this study was designed in terms of qualitative research strategy by using focus groups interviews. Another study can be done using individual interviews in order to find the relation of gender. A similar study can be also conducted with pupils from both public and private primary schools in order to make comparison.

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