

## **Voicing the unvoiced: Student stress**

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### **Introduction**

Teacher-student interaction and the extent to which teachers' behaviors play a part in student outcomes have long been an important domain of empirical research. The related literature has shown that these efforts have been fruitful both in theoretical and practical ways. With a similar framework, the present study explored the interaction of teachers' behaviour patterns and students' distress. Teachers' behaviour patterns refer to the actions undertaken by teachers to create and maintain a positive classroom atmosphere. Student distress can be defined as the extent that students feel stressed about the learning environment.

### **Theoretical framework**

One specific focus of classroom environment research has been the investigation of teacher-student interactions. The investigation of students' perceptions of teacher behavior in classrooms has been carried out from a systems perspective by Wubbels, Créton and Holvast (1988). This perspective argues that the behaviors of participants influence each other mutually and this leads to a circular communication, which not only influences behavior but also determines it (Koul & Fisher; 2006).

As followers of the systems perspective, Wubbels, Créton, and Hooymayers (1985) developed the Model for Interpersonal Teacher Behavior by adapting the Leary Model (1957) and designed the Questionnaire on Teacher Interaction (QTI) in the early 1980s. The model allows for a graphic representation of teacher-student interaction. The behavior of both parties can be recorded on the chart according to some measures which are mapped on a proximity dimension (cooperation or opposition) and on an influence dimension (dominance or submission). They form four quadrants divided into eight sectors, each of which describes different behavior characteristics that teachers may display.

A review of literature has indicated that numerous studies have explored teacher-student interaction concerning various issues such as student outcomes, attitude, and cultural

background (Fisher & Rickards, 1996; Rickards & Fisher, 1999; Wubbels & Levy, 1993). These studies have pointed out that higher cognitive outcome scores and attitudinal outcomes are positively associated with leadership, helping, friendly and understanding teacher behaviors. In contrast, dissatisfied, admonishing and uncertain teacher behaviors are negatively associated with students' cognitive and attitudinal outcomes.

There is also an increasing concern among teachers, parents and students themselves about emotional and behavioral problems which are manifestations of stress in educational environments all around the world. Lazarus and Folkman (1984) noted that stress is perceived as a product of a dynamic relationship between the person and the environment. The difference in people's reactions to the same stressor is explained by how one perceives the event. Concerning the students, they also experience a complex array of external and internal stressors in everyday life that stem from the educational environment, home and self (Moulds, 2003).

Having difficulties with lessons, being teased by classmates and teachers, and experiencing failure may be given as examples of stressors related to educational environments. Perceived favorable treatment given to one child, experience of generation gap or ignored preferences can be listed as examples of stressors associated with home. The examples of the self-related stressors can be: perception of poor ability, dissatisfaction with physical appearance or concerns with popularity. All these stressors may cause stress manifestations (Compas, Hinden & Gerhardt, 1995; Compas, Orasan & Grant, 1993; Lock, 1996; Moulds, 2003).

Concerning the association of stress to the educational environments, the issue deserves attention considering its important role in promoting or discouraging the learning process. It has been revealed that high chronic stress contributes to ineffective cognitive processes promoting performance failures as in school performance of adolescents. Another contribution is that it influences interpersonal relations between adults and adolescents adversely (Matheny, Aycock, Pugh, Curlette & Canella, 1986). The present study builds upon emerging research into student stress and students' perceptions of teacher-student interactions. The purpose is to explore if these interaction patterns act as a stressor for students.

## **Method**

### Research questions

The purpose of this study is to determine associations between students' perceptions of teacher-student interactions and student stress. In the light of this purpose, the research questions investigated in this study are:

1. Does teacher-student interaction influence student stress?
2. If yes, what is the correlation between teacher-student interaction and student stress?

### Participants

The participants in this study were 114 preparatory level students, 65 male and 49 female, studying English at a private university in Istanbul, Turkey during the spring semester of 2005-2006 academic year. They were all from different educational backgrounds, being graduates of different high schools all over Turkey. The age range among the participants was between 18 and 21. The participants were randomly selected from 19 intact classes.

### Data collection and analysis

Data for the present study were collected by the Questionnaire on Teacher Interaction (QTI) developed by Wubbels and Levy (1991) and Student Stress Inventory (SSI) developed by Fimian et al. (1989). With the aim of preventing any language blockage, the participants were provided with Turkish translations of the questionnaires.

Both instruments, the QTI and SSI, were piloted with 20 students and the layout of the instruments was designed accordingly before the actual study. The reliability of the QTI was assessed by Cronbach alpha coefficient, which resulted in .7685. Reliabilities for the sub-scales were computed as .8973 for leadership, .9174 for helpful/friendly, .8886 for understanding, .7508 for student responsibility/freedom, .7897 for uncertain, .7981 for dissatisfied, .7543 for admonishing, and .7082 for strict. The reliability of the SSI was computed as .7550. Reliabilities of the sub-scales ranged between .7181 and .8841 (emotional manifestations: .8841, distress: .8393, behavioral manifestations: .7181).

Quantitative data collected from the above-mentioned instruments were analyzed by the Statistical Package of the Social Sciences (SPSS) 15.0. Correlation analysis was carried out to explore the purposes of this study. Correlations between the sub-scales of QTI and SSI were computed to find out if any aspect of teacher-student interaction related to students' distress, emotional manifestations, and/or behavioral manifestations.

## **Results**

With regard to students' distress, the correlation analysis showed that six aspects of teacher-student interaction correlated significantly with it; perceiving the teacher as dissatisfied ( $r = -.352, p < .001$ ), as displaying high leadership ( $r = .323, p < .001$ ), as friendly ( $r = .321, p < .001$ ), as understanding ( $r = .306, p < .002$ ), as uncertain ( $r = -.292, p < .003$ ), and as admonishing ( $r = -.242, p < .010$ ). In other words, it was revealed that students' perceptions on the leadership, friendliness, and understanding of their teachers related to their distress negatively. Concerning this information, the conclusion was that the more students reported their teachers as showing high leadership, friendliness, and understanding, the less distress they might be expected to experience. Values obtained also demonstrated that students' perceptions on the dissatisfaction, uncertainty, and admonishing behaviors of their teachers related to their distress positively. Hence, it was concluded that the more students considered their teachers to be dissatisfied, uncertain, and admonishing, the more stress they could be expected to experience.

Correlation analysis also showed that six aspects of teacher-student interaction i.e., 'students' perceptions on the dissatisfaction ( $r = .257, p < .007$ ), uncertainty ( $r = .257, p < .007$ ), leadership ( $r = -.244, p < .010$ ), admonishing behaviors ( $r = .220, p < .019$ ), understanding ( $r = -.212, p < .024$ ), and friendliness of their teachers ( $r = -.197, p < .037$ ) correlated significantly with students' emotional manifestations, the emotional ways students react to stress. That is, the results obtained showed that three aspects of teacher-student interaction correlated positively with their emotional manifestations. In other words, the more students perceive their teachers as dissatisfied, uncertain, and/or admonishing, the more they could be expected to experience emotional manifestations, i.e., feeling insecure, scared, pressured, depressed and so forth. The values obtained also demonstrated that students' perceptions on the leadership, understanding, and friendliness of their teachers negatively correlated with their emotional manifestations. Concerning this information, the more students consider their teachers as

displaying high leadership, understanding, and friendliness, the less they could be expected to experience emotional manifestations.

Finally, correlation analysis indicated that only two aspects of teacher-student interaction, students' perceptions on the dissatisfaction ( $r = .307$ ,  $p < .002$ ) and uncertainty of their teachers ( $r = .237$ ,  $p < .012$ ) positively correlated with their behavioral manifestations. Thus, the more students perceive their teachers as dissatisfied and uncertain, the more they could be expected to be experiencing behavioral manifestations such as acting offensively with others, 'bad mouthing' certain classmates, teachers, and school staff, talking back to teachers, and so on.

### **Conclusion**

Various studies investigating teacher-student interactions revealed that it is associated with student outcome, attitude, and cultural background. In line with these studies, the present study has explored another association of teacher-student interactions i.e., student stress. In other words, the dimensions of the QTI were found to be significantly associated with student stress. In particular, students' stress scores were higher when they perceived greater dissatisfied, admonishing, and uncertain behaviours in their teachers' interpersonal behaviours. Conversely, students' stress scores were lower when they perceived greater leadership, helpful/friendly, and understanding behaviours in their teachers' interpersonal behaviours.

Congruent with these findings, it would be a failure not to note here that if English language teachers want to have less stressed students, they should favorably ensure the presence of interpersonal behaviours such as being understanding, helpful/friendly and showing leadership. On the contrary, they should avoid interpersonal behaviors such as dissatisfied, admonishing, and uncertain ones, which may lead to stress among students.

It is of high importance to remember here that stress contributes to ineffective cognitive processes, promoting performance failures, as in school performance, and it also influences interpersonal relations of adults and adolescents adversely (Matheny, Aycock, Pugh, Curlette & Canella, 1986). Therefore, it is very important for a teacher to create and maintain a favourable classroom learning environment through positive interpersonal behaviors. Further

studies could be made in different educational contexts with different participant groups to generalize the findings.

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