

STUDENT PERCEPTIONS ABOUT THE PROFESSIONAL COMPETENCE OF UNIVERSITY FACULTY MEMBERS: EVIDENCE FROM PAKISTAN

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ABSTRACT

The study attempted to examine student perceptions about the professional competence of teachers in a higher education institution with the aim of finding out how the learning environment is affected by teaching quality because the importance of teachers in contributing to the manpower development of a country renders them as a resource whose effectiveness and development cannot be ignored. The researcher used a qualitative method of inquiry to glean data pertinent to the research questions. The study analyzed the standards of communication, attitude, pedagogy and expertise in effective teaching and how they were perceived by both undergraduate and graduate students. Focus group discussions featuring semi-structured questions were the basis for collecting data which was thematically coded. The objective of the study was to ascertain student perceptions of faculty effectiveness. The findings brought to light that both groups of students had reciprocal perceptions regarding what constitutes effective teaching. Attitude, communication, and fairness in assessment criteria showed a high degree of importance for students, whereas expertise was not an issue since it was a requirement for employment in the first place according to both groups. It emerged that students' views of the professional competence of university faculty greatly matched the researcher's expectations. And this in regard to the research questions it is of importance for students of a business school if they are to achieve their academic goals. It is their right to expect their faculty to teach and train them effectively on essential skills required to work in the business environment.

Key words: Attitude, Communication, Effective Teaching, Expertise, Student Perceptions.

Introduction

The question of professionalism in teaching has been the subject of interest for educators for several decades. In fact, it has been argued that the success or failure of programs of education rely mainly on faculty qualifications and sufficiency when utilized with commitment and competence (Ngada as cited in Fajonyomi, 2007). The researcher being a professional academic for over four decades and having a personal interest in enhancing the quality of teaching and learning and its impact on student achievement was motivated to investigate the issue from the higher education students' perceptions of their faculty members. To examine this from a larger perspective, it must be agreed that human capital development is supreme in nation building and thus, an issue of importance in the case of Pakistan. Therefore, teachers are the main resource pool given the fact that the teacher is the facilitator and the student is the learner. Adeniyi (1993) stated that the quality and quantity of teachers is instrumental if a country's manpower is to be developed for economic development. Given this importance, educators have focused on effective teaching as a goal of educational enterprises since it contributes to the quality of learning. Another aspect under consideration is the need for accountability in terms of performance benchmarks which contribute to policy making regarding quality. In this context, systems of assessment are a crucial measure of teaching effectiveness since the critical factor in deciding student success is effective teaching. Coming to the fact that student evaluations of teaching are a common method of determining teaching effectiveness in higher education, it becomes imperative to examine student perceptions of the issue and how they could contribute to teacher development. The study will throw light on the research problem, the research question, and the literature review which evidences the importance of teachers as a resource in human capital development, possessing characteristics of teaching effectiveness as perceived by university teachers. In addition, the research methodology and findings pave the way for the conclusion that teacher effectiveness characteristics as perceived by higher education students validate earlier outcomes.

Research problem

There is a pressing need to enhance teaching quality in higher education and taking students on board in the teaching and learning endeavor is significantly important since student views of teaching and learning scenarios would provide meaningful feedback contributing to improvements in teacher performance, since at this stage the students are mature; therefore, their perceptions would help teachers modify their teaching. In the context of higher education in Pakistan, hiring of teachers is on the basis of qualifications and experience, however, there are no measures to ascertain their effectiveness leading to a gap between observed and actual effectiveness of teaching in higher education. This situation prompted the researcher into wanting to investigate students' viewpoints in evaluating teaching effectiveness.

Research question

1. How do students perceive effective teaching in the context of a private sector institution of higher education in Pakistan?

Literature review

Higher education places the development of human capital as a matter of supreme importance. That means that selection, development, and assessment of teachers are the keys to boosting teacher effectiveness, and in turn, improving student instruction and learning. This requires that all aspects of the management of teachers as a resource must be regulated around several measures of effective teaching (Odden, 2011). According to Spencer and Schmelkin (2002), teacher evaluation has several purposes, namely, formative which allows for feedback to students of a demonstrative nature bringing out both positive and negative effects; for teachers regarding their teaching and improvements required therein; and finally, a summative purpose allowing administrators to make personnel decisions and students to contribute to opinions about faculty. To corroborate these views, Harvey (2011) stated that student perceptions of teacher competence provide information for faculty improvement, as well as guide future students in course selection and administrators to make decisions in terms of teacher service and promotion. Furthermore, such evaluation can contribute to accountability and quality assurance processes which are not the most important purpose of teacher evaluation. The most important purpose remains improvement in the quality of learning.

To examine the question of effective teaching via student evaluations as an important contribution in determining the overall characteristics of effective teachers, it is necessary to get some understanding of how students perceive their teachers. Student perceptions are important given that they impact student learning. According to Kasiisa and Tamale (2013), effective teachers are those who contribute to student learning. In fact, teacher quality is an important forecaster of student learning and achievement (Koedell & Betts, 2007). Hativa (2000) defined effective teaching as that which results in efficacious and favorable learning for students and is significant and profound. Penny (2004) took this definition further and expressed that effective teaching contributes to the environment of the learner leading to construction and discovery of knowledge, development of creative and critical skills which contribute to life-long learning for students. McGee (1978) was of the view that student attitudes towards teaching and course could affect perceptions of teaching effectiveness.

Gurney (1985) questioned whether student views were based on real perceptions regarding a teacher or predetermined paradigms of what constitutes effective teaching. Student views of effective teachers are only one standard used for determining teacher efficacy (Nonis & Hudson, 2004). Peer evaluation and teacher profile documents are additional measures of teacher evaluation. However, previous research has identified several features that are trademarks of teaching effectiveness. Among these there appeared clear elements such as communication, understanding, knowledge competence, clear articulation, zeal, education, impartial assessment practices, controlled workload, and purposeful assignments (Marsh & Roche, 1993). Delaney, Johnson, Johnson and Treslan (2010) in their research identified characteristics of effective teachers to be possessing knowledge, had strong communication skills, were professional and organized, able to engage students through being approachable, respectful and responsive, and having a sense of humor. Researchers have differed in the number of characteristics, although there is a great deal of similarity regarding what constitutes effective teaching.

Regarding student perceptions of teaching effectiveness, Penny (2004) was of the view that student evaluations when given in the form of feedback regarding teaching leads to significant improvement in teaching. Al Hinai (2011) upholds the view that student evaluations of teachers have gained importance as data for teacher evaluations. On a discussion of the reasons for student evaluations of teaching effectiveness, Cashin (1996) and Feldman (1997) were of the view that they were a source of feedback for teachers to improve their teaching for the purpose of promotion decisions, for selecting courses by students, and providing a measure for teaching research. Penny (2004) maintained that the fundamental purpose of student evaluations was for the purpose of teaching improvement and for holding teachers accountable for their work. Most importantly, student evaluations would provide a basis for teachers to reflect on their teaching through an identification of their strengths and weaknesses (Penny, 2004). Centra (1993) gave student evaluations of teaching another dimension that of teacher accountability. Evaluation of teachers and courses gave students a voice through which teacher and curriculum issues could be addressed. Another aspect of measuring teaching effectiveness is in terms of the mission and goals of universities. Clark (1995) categorized teacher efficacy on the basis of cognitive and affective goals. The cognitive goals were professional in nature, whereas the affective ones were personal characteristics.

To conclude, whatever may be the features and goals regarding teaching effectiveness, it is crucial for teacher development and nation building.

Research methodology

The research study originated from the researcher's personal interest in the subject of professional competence of faculty members viewed from the lens of students. The study followed Denzin and Lincoln's (2005) approach of interpretive inquiry which is a qualitative research methodology which centers on discerning the why and wherefore people give to their actions and intercommunication with others (Smith as cited in Given, 2008). According to Marshall and Rossman (2006), qualitative methods of inquiry are befitting descriptive research where the context and setting is emphasized leading to a profound understanding of participant experiences. Therefore, this interpretivist research used qualitative inquiry methods. Within qualitative research a single case was examined which provided a narrative account of students' perceptions in terms of professional competence of university faculty. It was felt that the case study approach would be especially useful because it would provide a rich account aiming at answering 'what' and 'how' questions. The participants offered explanations which allowed the researcher to predict the outcomes within the unique case and determine whether understanding is being influenced in that individual case (Woodside, 2010). In this context the researcher conducted two focus group discussions. The unit of analysis was student views about the professional competence of university faculty members. The focus group discussions were

held in a mutually conducive environment for both the participants and the researcher within the institution premises. Each discussion lasted between 30 to 45 minutes.

Research participants

The research participants for the two focus group discussions comprised both male and female students. Group 1 consisted of BBA students numbering six and Group 2 consisted of MBA students also numbering six. In addition, the makeup of the students included students from four disciplines, namely, communication, marketing, finance and management.

Research tools/Data collection instruments

In order to achieve the research objectives, the researcher used a focus group discussion guide to elicit data relevant to student views of the professional competence of university faculty. The choice was based on the fact that focus group data reveals that personal opinions have the capacity to provide for and develop information when members support and extend one another's views in the course of the discussion (Bloor, Frankland, Thomas & Robson, 2001). The focus group discussion guide was on a semi-structured basis allowing the participants to enter into the discussion and to even extend it (Lichtman, 2006).

Procedure for analysis

Data analysis being the process of making meaning through consolidation, reduction and interpretation of the narrative and the researcher's observation and understanding, the construction of categories or themes containing recurring data patterns became possible (Merriam, 2001). Such were the recommendations guiding analysis of data which led to the creation of categories reflecting the research purpose through conceptually concurring outcomes. Thus, after transcription of focus group discussion recordings, thematic coding of data was done with a view to understanding what characteristics constituted a professionally competent faculty member.

Ethical considerations

The ethical guidelines of the British Educational Research Association were followed for the purpose of participant consent, confidentiality and anonymity.

Findings and discussion

This study aims at examining student perceptions regarding the professional competence of university faculty members since student feedback contributes to teacher improvement and development (Harvey, 2011). In this context the importance of teachers in contributing to the manpower development of a country renders them as a resource whose effectiveness and development cannot be ignored.

The study employed qualitative methods to glean data representing student perceptions of the characteristics of effective teachers. The method used was focus group discussions conducted by the researcher. The discussion data was thematically coded leading to the emergence of characteristics which students felt were important for teachers to have if they were to be considered effective. In spite of the fact that the focus group discussions were conducted in English, there were a few instances of code switching between English and Urdu leading the researcher to translate these responses into English.

In response to the focus group discussions the following were the findings:

1. The first question requested for information regarding specific characteristics of the ideal teacher. The responses emerging regarding these, first and foremost, called for good knowledge of the subject. Other characteristics included cooperation and understanding, honesty, freedom from bias, not indulging in favoritism, being open to discussion, having ability to build confidence and motivate, employ good teaching methodologies, and practical teaching relevant to the Pakistani context. To this question this is what students had to say:

"The ideal teacher should have good knowledge,"

"I think the characteristic of the teacher should be that he should have the best knowledge of the field he is teaching,"

"He or she should be good in the subject,"

"A teacher should be cooperative and understanding,"

"...teaching practical cases should be a common practice,"

"I want practical cases which represent our country,"

"Teachers should not focus on their favorites....,"

"... the teacher should be straight forward, honest and cooperative,"

"I don't think all teachers are fair, most are biased."

These remarks establish that students consider these affective and cognitive characteristics as important when naming traits of effective teachers. The traits identified by students correspond with the attributes selected by Marsh and Hocevar (1991) as effective teaching factors and further reinforced by Ralph (2003) who concluded that commendable teaching at tertiary level is evident and the characteristics can be evaluated.

2. The second question addressed the matter of teacher attitude in regard to student learning. In this remark it was found that teacher attitudes were not favorable in the sense that teachers demonstrated autocratic behavior, were indifferent to the concerns of their students, displayed inappropriate emotions and were even angry. This is what one student had to say about his teacher:

"The attitude depresses me because it was very much inappropriate."

Another student remarked regarding his teacher's indifference:

"He came in the class and sit down and he don't even stand and write on the board or about anything like this. He just came and sit down. Student you open the chapter and do it yourself."

Yet another student observed his teacher's negative behavior thus:

"He is so rude. Whenever we go to him he is like why you are here? Why have You come here?"

In terms of some teachers displaying positive behavior this student said:

"So apart from negatives there are positives as well."

Thus, what can be deduced from these student expressions is that an optimistic disposition revealed in teaching environments and teacher attitudes reflect on a teacher's professional ethics which contributes to teacher efficacy (Rinaldo, Denig, Sheeran, Cramer-Benjamin, Vermette, Foote, et al, 2009).

3. In reference to the third question regarding whether teachers maintained an atmosphere of approachability and promoted appreciation of learning as a lifelong activity, students' views were divided. Whereas some students expressed that they had had teachers who were approachable, helpful and cooperative, others felt their teachers were either indifferent or in a hurry to leave after their class so it was not possible for students to interact with them. These feelings were expressed by both MBA and BBA students. One student remarked:

"You can approach them any time. They give personal cell number that even they, not only in class, they are available 24/7 I would say. They are such helpful person, they go even out of path to help like...is something volunteer person you can say."

Another student expressed it in this way:

"According to me I think approachability or interaction of myself with teacher has improved in MBA program because there are many teachers who work in practical field and they just share your phone number with us. They help in academic as well as practical grounds."

Yet another student corroborated this view thus:

"There are many teachers who do interact with students. They provide them phone numbers and send their room numbers. I think it depends on the individual whether you want to interact or not."

On the flip side one student said:

"Sometimes it gets really hard to communicate with them because they leave the campus as soon as the class is done."

Another student had this to say:

"In my opinion few teacher come in class, give lectures and go away. They don't bother whether the student is learning or not."

And another student said:

"...but there is also some teacher who cannot communicate with students, do not create good environment in class, so students cannot ask single problem with the teacher..."

It emerged that approachability features as an affective goal in teacher effectiveness. Delaney, Johnson, Johnson and Treslan (2010) in their research on students' perceptions of effective teaching identified nine characteristics of effective teachers. Approachability featured as the third most noted characteristic and its definitions provided by students regarded positive teacher student interaction, student comfort in asking questions and seeking advice, and genuine efforts by teachers to facilitate students in achieving their academic objectives as its constituents. Other adjectives in this characteristic included accessible, positive, friendly, happy and helpful. Axelrod (2008) also found approachability and accessibility as characteristics of effective teaching according to student views and these surpass time and mode of delivery.

4. The fourth question asked for perceptions about the level of communication effectiveness in course delivery and whether the verbal and nonverbal communication is positive. Again, student views were mixed with most students emphasizing that verbal communication was better than nonverbal; however, inappropriate communication was also pointed out. As one student remarked:

"In my point of view, communication depends on the individual and teacher that how much he or she wants to get involved with the students. How much he is giving space to the students. If he is giving space to the students then he will be able to communicate easily and most of the teachers here are positive so verbal and nonverbal communication are positive here."

Another student said:

"Basically you can say it depends on the individual teacher that whether he is doing verbal or nonverbal communication. A measurable scale appropriate communication should be done to different students about this criteria. ...teachers greatly rely on verbal communication; I think nonverbal communication plays another important part which should be focused."

On another note one student remarked:

"They have to communicate properly!"

Here is another student viewpoint;

"...there is less nonverbal communication. Verbal communication is very much there, but I think nonverbal is lacking,"

Yet another student added a different perspective:

"... I think over here teachers just focus on their favorites and they talk to them and communicate with them and they don't motivate other students who are a bit shy to talk."

To support the above viewpoint with another aspect reflecting hostility on the part of the teacher this student remarked:

"Some teachers have created fear in students' hearts that they are not able to talk to their teachers."

To conclude the discussion about communication effectiveness of teachers and the value of verbal and nonverbal communication behaviors for students the researcher's findings established that nonverbal behaviors were important to students verbal behaviors conveyed a sense of being impersonal. According to Witt and Wheelless (2001), communication behaviors are divided into verbal and nonverbal types. Verbal behaviors are evident through the use of present tense verbs, the speaker sharing his own experiences, sense of humor, and including students in conversations by using "we" rather than "I" or "you." Nonverbal behaviors are seen through eye contact, enthusiasm, smiles, relaxed body posture and nod of the head. Teachers who demonstrate these behaviors show nearness or concurrence and have positive associations in the minds of students. To add to this, Steele (2010) stated that nonverbal communication is an important determinant in effective teaching of all subjects. Further to this, Prozesky (2000) was of the view that verbal and nonverbal communication can help the teacher to present complex concepts to students who would be able to understand them easily.

5. Regarding the question about the teacher's expertise and experience, the students felt that their teachers had good expertise and experience; however, it was felt that visiting faculty had more and better experience. Some students felt that teachers had the expertise and experience but were unable to deliver. This problem has its roots in the lack of communication effectiveness. This is what one student had to say about the difference between visiting and full-time faculty:

"I'll say the visiting faculty, they have a good experience as well as expertise because they know they are in the market...they share current experiences in the market. The academic teachers whose life is spent by the teaching are lacking experience sometimes."

Another student said:

"I think all the teachers had experience and expertise whatever they were teaching."

And another remarked:

"I think there is a good balance between experience and expertise in...teachers."

On a slightly different note one said:

"The experience is required for every faculty to teach. Yes, they have experience but problem is their deliverability. They are not able to deliver properly."

On the same vein another student had this to say:

"Yes, a delivery is one of the factors that needs to be focused when you choose a teacher or when a teacher has decided to convey a concept or like that."

Yet another varied point of view was expressed thus:

"...visiting faculty have good experience but they don't communicate like in that way. If they good experience they communicate, but if they have bad experience they don't communicate with us."

It may be summarized that expertise and experience hold importance for students since they are key factors in the achievement of the learning goals of students. Delaney et al. (2010) found through their research that students expected their teachers to be up-to-date and active in their field if they want their teaching to be engaging and students expected that in order to term them as

effective. Darling-Hammond (2005) stated that expertise or subject knowledge was related to teacher effectiveness and student achievement.

6. The final question was regarding teacher evaluation of student performance and whether students felt they were fair. The majority of students felt that teachers were greatly biased when evaluating students with better grades being assigned to favorite students. Very few students were of the view that some teachers were not biased. Students also felt that justification for the grades given were not clear. To substantiate this one student expressed it in this way:
"Fairness depends on the teacher...the teacher's favorite student he will get full marks but the other guy who wrote better, he won't be graded that much."

Another student supported this and remarked:

"I have had very bad experiences in this regard. I don't think all teachers are fair....I think people who keep running after teachers, they have a good impression in front of them and in the end get good grades."

One more student said:

"I think many of the teachers here are very biased. They have their own favorites and they have this image in their mind of every student and then they grade them according to that and we cannot do anything about that."

Among those who felt that teachers were not wholly biased, one student had this to say:

"There are many teachers who give the marks on hard working and all, but also there are some teachers who are biased and do not give the marks which we are actually able for but normally I think it's ok."

Another student who had similar views said:

"In my point of view few teachers are fair and few have favorites. They are basically biased."

Thus, regarding evaluation and assessment Rubio (2009) stated that effective teachers subscribe to the view that every student has the potential to achieve success and they endeavor to make this happen. In this context assessment becomes an efficient learning process in which the effective teacher has expertise, fair practice, and an equitable system of evaluation. Cameron (2002) contributed to this with the view that in the learning process students should understand the assessment methods and benefit from them.

It may thus be concluded that students' views of the professional competence of university faculty greatly matched the researcher's expectations. It emerged that students have very clear views about what they expect from their faculty and are critical of their lapses. This demonstrative feedback from students could assist faculty in being better prepared and work toward improving attitudes and communication skills in their interactions with students. And this, in regard to the research question is of importance for students of a business school if they are to achieve their academic goals. It is their right to expect their faculty to teach and train them effectively on essential skills required to work in the business environment.

Conclusion

The following limitations were observed as a result of the research:

1. The data was obtained from only one private business school in Karachi being of a qualitative nature; however, several other business schools exist in the same region and could have been included for richer outcomes.
2. Participants were selected from an institution of higher education while a wider selection from other institutions would add to the value of the research.
3. Quantitative methods could have been included to triangulate the data, in order to render the findings as more authentic.
4. The number of focus group discussions could have been increased so that a greater variety of student perceptions of the professional competence of university faculty would have come forth.

The research outcomes validated the findings of earlier researchers (Delaney et al., 2010; Darling-Hammond, 2005; Marsh & Roche, 1993) regarding student perceptions of teachers' effectiveness. However, it is clear that a larger number of participants from a variety of academic institutions of higher education and inclusion of survey methods of data gathering would lead to generalizability of the findings could be a step forward in effective teacher training and development so that teachers are able to apply teaching pedagogies that would enhance the quality of learning and foster meaningful teacher student relationships. In addition, teacher awareness of student expectations would improve teacher contributions to the achievement of the academic goals of students. Teachers could use the research outcomes to improve the process of teaching and learning, especially in the areas of expertise, pedagogy, attitudes, and communication. Student perceptions of university faculty would also aid faculty development and hiring processes as well. The findings merit further research and investment in faculty development programs in Pakistan.

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