

Academic Leadership in the Classroom: Towards Positive Student - Teacher Relationships in Postsecondary Institutions

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Abstract: The educational climate of a university plays a significant role in educational outcomes. Teachers can have a profound impact on student development and learning. Currently teachers are expected to not only transmit knowledge but to play an active role in students' personal development as members of society. Course content alone cannot accomplish this goal; more is required from the teacher to fuel students' personal development. Teachers who establish a bond of trust with students can maximize effective educational outcomes. If a safe environment is created where students can express their needs to their teachers regarding course presentation and teaching approaches, this will result in more positive educational outcomes. Conversely, if student input is neglected, learning is adversely affected, and students become disengaged. This study aimed to better understand effective relationships between faculty and students. A qualitative inquiry using an open-ended questionnaire was distributed to university students to investigate what factors students perceive to be the characteristics of an effective teacher. The findings indicate that students value teachers who combine two elements: interpersonal skills and depth of knowledge. Students appreciate teachers with whom they feel safe with and respected, who consider their input in course design and teaching strategies. They value teachers whose concrete knowledge serves as a reference source for them. The study provided recommendations for building positive and productive relationships between students and teachers in higher education.

Keywords: *Student Learning Needs, Faculty Development, Faculty-Student Rapport, Productive Relation, Leaders In Class, Postsecondary Pedagogy.*

I. INTRODUCTION

The educational climate of a university plays a significant role in educational outcomes. Conventional wisdom holds that "good teachers" reinforce students' educational outcomes. Teachers can have a profound impact on student development and learning. They are more than being teachers in classroom; they are leaders in class who inspire, influence, build others and elevate them to reach their full potential. Currently teachers are expected to not only transmit knowledge but to play an active role in students' personal development as members of society. Numerous studies, old and recent, have emphasized the impact teachers have on students, whether positively or negatively. For example, Wilson (1975) reviewed two studies showing that faculty members' accessibility and relationships with students have a great impact on student educational outcomes and personal development. Similarly, Demir, Burton & Dunbar's recent (2019) study of the effects of enhancing teachers' knowledge of treating students shows a positive impact on student-teacher relationships. The nature of postsecondary institutions does not impose a specific approach for framing courses. Professors select their course agenda and the workload assigned to students. Hence, the impact they may have on their students varies. Course content alone cannot achieve positive effects on students; more is required from the teacher to fuel students' personal development. Teachers who establish a bond of trust with students can maximize effective educational outcomes. If a safe environment is created where students can express their needs to their teachers regarding course presentation and teaching approaches, this will result in more positive educational outcomes. Therefore, the present study sought to acquire student perspectives on classroom leadership by

professors by establishing a safe channel for them to express their views.

II. PROBLEM IDENTIFICATION AND BASIC PRINCIPLE

The student teacher relationship has emerged as a significant research topic in school and preschool settings, but remains largely neglected in higher education research. Although a review of the literature shows that the quality of student-teacher relationships has significant impacts on students, interestingly few studies have considered students' perspectives on effective teachers. The present study aimed to investigate this question. To clarify the proposed focus of the study, two areas have to be addressed:

- A glance at leadership
- Teachers as leaders

A glance at Leadership

Teachers are characterized as leaders in the classroom. Their leadership in the classroom is imperative, not optional, because besides teaching content, they have to consider their influence on students' learning ability and personal development. Having said that, the art of influence is the core of leadership. It has long been known that leadership is an essential ingredient for professional development (Boyum, 2008). Despite all the popular interest and writings on leadership, there is no consensus about the definition, best style or measurement of leadership (English, 2008; Grint, 2010; Preedy, Bennett & Wise, 2012). However, there is an agreement that leadership exists once a group of people come together to accomplish a common goal,

and some agreement that leadership is associated with influence. Leadership is not an individual effort but rather a relational process (English, 2008). Therefore, the simplest definition is "having a follower" (Grint, 2010, p. 2) or as Astin and Astin (2000) explained it, "a collective or group process" (p. 18). This process develops a supportive environment, shared responsibility, reciprocal caring and nurturing sustainability for future generations (Astin & Astin, 2000). A brief glance at the development of leadership theories, makes evident the importance of considering human needs; the recent increased attention to moral values, ethics, integrity, and enhancing the growth of members of organizations promotes collective interests rather than self-interest.

In the early stage of leadership studies, the emphasis was on rational thought, as the predominant belief was that rationalism is the best way to approach the world (English, 2008; Grint, 2010). At that time leadership was associated with control, absolute compliance to administrative command, and repression. However, later scholars have strongly disagreed with this view of leadership and more humanistic perspectives have emerged.

Teachers as Leaders

Despite the efforts to define educational leadership, there is no consensus in defining teacher-leaders as they engage in a wide range of activities in classroom and throughout the whole school. Katzenmeyer and Moller (2001) suggested a comprehensive definition, "teacher leaders are those teachers who lead within and beyond the classroom... identify with and contribute to a community of teacher learners and leaders . . . and influence others towards improved educational practice" (pp. 5–8).

Previous research suggests that positive teacher-student relationships can be characterized by closeness, care, connection, safety, trust, honesty, fairness, respect, openness, support, encouragement, availability and approachability.

Students believe that teaching, learning and assessment has an impact on their relationship with faculty (Bergstrom, 2010).

Demir, Burton & Dunbar (2019) conducted a study on professor-student rapport and perceived autonomy support as predictors of course and student outcomes and found that providing faculty members with professional development opportunities to enhance their rapport with students has a significant impact on enhancing student success.

On the contrary, a weak or dysfunctional relationship between professors and students can harm students, yet they do not know how to address it. For instance, in their study on students' experience with bullying by professors, Marraccini, Weyandt and Rossi (2015) asserted that students observe and experience bullying from teachers, yet they may not be equipped to address it or discuss it. Accordingly, the authors recommended more research focused on student-teacher relationship, especially on mistreatment of students.

In addition, students' freedom of expression is curtailed when it comes to participation in course development and selecting the type of instruction. In Luana & Cristina's (2017) study on student centered learning in Bucharest, Romania, they found that students' opinions are not usually welcome, especially when it is different from the opinion of the lecturer. Furthermore,

some professors do not want students challenging their expertise by suggesting ideas for instruction.

Another study conducted by Joye and Wilson (2015) explored the effect that professors' gender and perceived age has on the quality of their relations with students.

Hays (2008) suggested that applying the principles of servant leadership in teaching has favorable impact on learning outcomes. In his comparison of the traditional teaching style with servant leadership approaches, he found that the former reinforces the status quo of power disparities and dependence, whereas servant leadership promotes empowerment, autonomy and initiative.

An analysis of the literature shows that identifying the leadership characteristics of teachers in postsecondary institutions is still limited. More investigation is needed, with consideration of different settings along with creating a safe channel for students' freedom of expression.

II. METHODOLOGY

Kumar (2011) defined research design as a plan, strategy and structure of exploration that enables researchers to find answers to their research questions or problems. Reviewing and assessing literature in the area of research offers a path for the researcher to choose the appropriate methods (Loseke, 2013). Since cultural, linguistic and contextual frames influence human perception; the three elements differ based on different location and historical transformations (English, 2008). Since the nature of leadership is socially constructed, it is logical that this study be situated within the constructivist paradigm. The constructivist believes that the mind is active and constantly constructs and reconstructs knowledge to fit the person's conception. In this study, to acquire the participants' perspectives, an open-ended questionnaire was distributed to university students to investigate what factors students perceive to be the characteristics of an effective teacher. Participating students read a consent form assuring them of confidentiality and explaining the purpose of the study. They gave their informed consent by clicking on an endorsement statement that allowed them to start the questionnaire.

The setting of this research is the University of Jeddah, a prestigious university in Saudi Arabia. As a member of the university faculty, this gave the researcher access to the site and familiarity with the organizational structure, which is a solid, viable foundation for conducting this study. The data was examined closely, and each line or segment was given a name. In this step, the transcripts were re-read several times to ensure consistent data labelling practices. This approach keeps the researcher open to any possible theoretical direction, brings the researcher into deeper understanding and allows the researcher to see areas in which more data are needed (Charmaz, 2014). Coding is the first analytical step, which assists moving from labels to higher level of abstraction. After having all the data coded, the next phase of coding, which is focused coding, was used. In this phase, the most significant and related categories were selected and placed under central themes.

III. RESULTS

The study results indicate that two significant categories must be considered, to foster student-professor relationships in

the classroom. Students value teachers who combine two elements: interpersonal skills and depth in the given knowledge (The categories are in Table 1).

Interpersonal skills that participants emphasized consists of variety of elements. Students appreciate a learning environment where they feel safe to express their ideas and needs. When they express their preferences in shaping course instruction or participate in the class they want to be respected regardless of the accuracy of their views. They also emphasized that they want to feel that they are accepted, their presence in class is valued; and their contribution is respected.

Table 1: Elements for Positive Students Teachers in Classroom.

Categories	Interpersonal Skills	Subject Matter
Themes	Feeling safe	Focused on course materials
	Respect/ Accepting others	Accountable
	Appreciation	Organizing course materials
	Cooperation	Depth in knowledge
	Flexibility	Showing innovation and openness
	Modesty	Diversification in knowledge sources
	Leading by example	Link information

Participants noted that in class teachers need to lead by example; their actions should match their words. Some teachers lead the class from above and build barriers between themselves and their students. Participants in the current study emphasized their dislike of this teaching style. In contrast, they prefer teachers who are modest, flexible, understand the students' needs and encourage a cooperative learning environment.

The second element that students appreciate in their teachers is with regards to the given knowledge. Numerous themes emerged emphasizing that students value the depth and complete knowledge that teachers bring to the classroom. Some teachers, as the participants pointed out, do not focus on course materials, going off on tangents about unrelated subjects. Participants emphasised their need for teachers who demonstrate deep understanding and focus on the course materials. This does not mean being narrow in the course curriculum. Teachers are expected to be open to innovation and encourage improvements and keeping up to date in their field of expertise; such as directing students to different sources for knowledge. Furthermore, teachers must be accountable for their work and honest in their teaching and conveying knowledge.

Teacher organization is an important factor mentioned by many participants. Students appreciate teachers who are well organized in teaching and planning the course structure and who present the information as a connected whole rather than a fragmented series of isolated topics. This reinforces their trust in the teacher and builds rapport between students and teachers.

Students articulated that they consider teachers as a source for inspiration. Showing optimism and sending positive

messages to students are techniques that nurture students. On the other hand, students dislike teachers who use their authority to control students and restrict their development.

Students appreciate teachers with whom they feel safe with and respected, who consider their input in course design and teaching strategies. They value teachers whose concrete knowledge serves as a reference source for them.

IV. DISCUSSIONS

Considering teachers as leaders in the classroom means that developing students' learning and personality is the teacher's priority. It requires teachers to take into consideration the situation in the classroom and adjust their practice to meet the class's needs as appropriate. This view is aligned with the current leadership trend of situational leadership. However, without creating a safe environment for students to express their perspectives of the effective teachers, teachers will not be able to meet student needs.

The findings of the current study emphasised what is found in the literature. The previous research characterized positive relationship with teachers as: care, closeness safety, honesty and respect (Demir, Burton & Dunbar, 2019). Hence, the findings in the current study that students value teachers with good interpersonal skills who can provide rich, in-depth knowledge support the literature. Moreover, the findings are in conformance with Maslow's hierarchy of needs in which humans need to feel safe and have a sense of belonging and being appreciated.

Creating a peaceful school culture in which students can participate in framing the course nurtures their educational outcome. Students benefit when they see that their teachers appreciate their thoughts and participation in framing the course and considering their preferences. Furthermore, this type of teacher provides the cement needed for establishing a school culture based on trust and reciprocal respect and freedom of expression.

Students' perspectives and evaluations of the professors promote improvements in classroom leadership and creating relationships that reinforce students' experience and knowledge retention. Although the final course evaluation provides some view of the course and learning experience, it is not enough to show student perspectives on teacher excellence. Thus, more strategies and approaches need to be implemented to give students a safe, confidential space to express their views on their teachers, what type of teaching strategies, assignments and behaviours they find more productive. Additionally, the focus of students' evaluations of their professors must be widened from just considering course content and teaching strategies to allow students space to share their thoughts on effective relationships with their teachers.

Considering students' voices allow a new addition to the practice of teaching, as students are the consumers of the educational process. Consequently, the quality of teaching will flourish. In addition, if students feel safe to express their thoughts, they can report hostile behaviours they might encounter from their teachers such as bullying or victimization.

Postsecondary institutions can implement several measures to learn from students' views on their teachers and the

educational process and thus reinforce productive relationships. These include regular meetings with faculty to discuss student feedback on teaching and leadership strategies in the classroom; providing a consultation process for students who have issues with their teachers and vice versa; establishment of an award for excellence in teachings based on students' views.

CONCLUSIONS

Teacher in higher education institutions are not mere transmitters of knowledge; rather, they are leaders who are expected to influence and create positive effect on students. Thus, student-teacher relationships should be considered as a relevant construct for higher education institutions because of their impact on students' personal development and learning outcomes. This study investigated what factors students perceive to be necessary for effective student teacher relationships. The findings indicate that students value teachers who combine two elements: interpersonal skills and factors related to the knowledge presented. Students appreciate teachers with whom they feel safe and respected, who consider their input in course design and teaching strategies. They value teachers whose concrete knowledge serves as a reference source for them. The study suggested opening more safe channels for students to share their perspectives and feedback. Consequently, students' relationships with their teachers will be nurtured, their course satisfaction will increase, and student outcomes will improve.

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