

Mexican Teachers' Perceptions of Their Students

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Abstract

This study explored the perceptions of Mexican teachers about their students social and intellectual potential. Participant teachers were from different educational levels and fields of study. A pencil and paper questionnaire was completed by 573 teachers. Questions explored perceptions about their student intellectual and social abilities which were compared by gender, grade level and academic ability. Results indicated no differences by gender or grade level. However, both intellectual and social abilities were perceived as higher in students who showed higher academic competency. These findings must argue that, in Mexico, there is now few differential perception of students due to gender and grade level, but that the level of academic competency continues to be a factor influencing the social and intellectual perceptions of the student.

Keywords

Teachers, Teacher Perceptions, Grade Level, Level of Competency, Gender

1. Introduction

Teachers' beliefs, practices and attitudes are important for understanding and improving educational processes. Teachers perception of their students depend upon several pupils' characteristics that seem relevant in shaping teacher's beliefs their expectations. This work aims to explore Mexican teachers' perceptions of their students based upon three major variables: gender, grade level and level of academic competency. How teachers think about their students and their students' backgrounds is important because "teaching involves the enactment of that thinking" (Bomer, Dworin, May, & Semingson, 2008, p. 2524).

Research on teacher perceptions of students frequently focus on key student characteristics that are associated with their expectations and beliefs (Todd, 2011), and they are related the students' learning. Teacher expectations of their students have been considered instrumental to success in the instructional process, and influential since the seminal study by Rosenthal and Jacobson in 1966.

There is sound research on student characteristics such as age, gender, race, ethnic background, and socioeconomic status that affect teachers' perceptions of their students (Brophy, 1983). Jussim, Smith, Madon, and Palumbo (1988) posited that, in sum, the strongest influences on teacher perceptions of students relies on the student's past performance and motivation. In general, research supports that a student who has performed well in the past is expected to perform well in the future. More recently, research on teacher perceptions has shown innovative approaches that explore the effects of beauty (Talamas, Mavor, & Perrett, 2016) or weight (Fox & Edmunds, 2000) in teachers' perceptions of their students.

Akey (2006) argued that perceived academic competence or achievement had positive influences on reading and math and that "perceived academic competence (was shaped by the) school context—teacher support, clear and consistent ex-

pectations of behavior, and student-to-student interactions in the classroom” (p. 24). These elements related to academic competence were found to have a greater impact in teachers own success than the student’s engagement. That is, when a teacher believes a student is competent, the student is more likely to perform well in class. Likewise, when teachers hold negative perceptions of low performing students they inadvertently perpetuate low achievement (Contreras, 2011). This study focused on the influence of gender, level of competence and grade level of students on teachers’ perceptions of their students.

The variable of gender was defined as either as male or female: level of competency was operationally defined, but the perceptions of the teachers as low, regular or average, and high school performers. Such perceptions are usually associated to the grades, GPA, and the overall perception of student effort, commitment, and dedication to their schooling.

Teachers with positive perceptions of their students may give more encouragement and positive reinforcement to their students than those who they perceive negatively (Baksh, 1984). Further, research suggests that when teachers have high expectations of their students, the students work to meet those expectations (Rosenthal & Jacobson, 1966). In other words, the key to the effects of the so called Pygmalion effect, may reside on the assumption that students, who perceive that their teachers have high expectations of their academic achievement are more motivated to try to meet those expectations and perform better academically than their peers who perceive low expectations from their teachers (Muller, Katz, & Dance, 1999).

In other words, the key to the effects of the so-called Pygmalion Effect, which states that a teacher’s expectations about a student’s potential might subtly encourage the performance and the likelihood of success (Rosenthal & Jacobson, 1966), may reside in the assumption that students who perceive that their teachers have high expectations of their academic achievement are more motivated to try to meet those expectations. Further, these students may perform better academically than their peers who perceive low expectations from their teachers (Muller, Katz, & Dance, 1999).

In this work, it is assumed that perceptions of students are directly related to the development of expectations.

The purpose of the study was to explore Mexican teachers’ perceptions of their students’ intellectual and social potential based upon three variables: gender, grade level and level of academic competency.

2. Methodology

2.1 Participants

A paper-and-pencil anonymous questionnaire was voluntarily completed by 573 teachers from different educational levels in the state of Yucatan in Mexico. From these, 185 are male (32%) and 388 (68%) are female. Teachers were on the average 32 years old ($SD = 3.2$), with a modal seniority of 13 years in the public-school system. Almost half of them worked full-time, a quarter was half-time, and the remaining quarter were teachers hired on an hourly basis. Teachers showed, in general, similar characteristics to teachers in other states in this country such as training, income, and motivation to teach.

Table 1. Profile of participants.

Primary		Junior High		High school		College		Total	
m	f	m	f	m	f	m	f	m	f
39	141	34	141	47	74	23	34	185 (32)	388 (68)
180 (31)		215 (38)		121 (21)		57 (10)		573 (100)	

Legend: m: males; f: females; (%).

Special fields of teaching were: Spanish (23%), social sciences (32%), STEAM (science, technology, engineering, art, mathematics) subjects (20%), arts and physical education (5%) and others (20%). Table 1 depicts the participants by gender and grade level taught.

2.2 Instruments

A pencil and paper scale to explore expectation towards three dimensions of the student was developed. The questionnaires' was piloted for clarity and intend with a group of teachers not contemplated in the final sample. All items were posited as: This student is in a 6 point Likert response scale.

A Factor analysis with Varimax rotation post-hoc, however, supported two factors loading 6 items each, rather than the proposed 3 factor structure. Factors were extracted by principal competent analysis and Kaiser Normalization. The first factor was related with Intellectual Capacity (.736) and the second with Social abilities (.677). Table 2 illustrates dimensions, operational definitions, and items included. Further data analysis was based on this two-factor structure.

Table 2. Dimensions of the survey.

Dimension	Items	Factor post-hoc
Intellectual capacity	Intelligent	1
Intelligence, ability to reason, memory. Cognitive potential.	Reasonable	1
	Good Ideas	1
	Good Memory	1
Personality	Friendly	2
Traits associate with likability such as sense of humorous or being nice.	Nice	2
	Sense of humor	2
	Likes to learn	1
Social aptitude	Communication	1
Ability to establish interpersonal relations and social support.	Pleasant	2
	Popular	2
	Friendly	2

Legend: 1-Intellectual abilities; 2-Social abilities.

The overall scale reliability analysis reported an alpha coefficient of .986.

3. Results

Participants received randomly a questionnaire asking them to think of either a male or a female student, with either high, average, or low school performance. In general, 300 (52%) teachers responded to a male student and 273 (48%) to a female one. Table 3 shows the distribution of questionnaires by teacher's grade level, and by pre-established student's lev-

el of competency.

Table 3. Participants by pre-established gender and level of competency of the student.

Grade level	Competency						Total
	Low		Average		High		
	m	f	m	f	m	f	
Primary	33	32	31	32	25	30	183
Junior	35	38	39	26	39	28	215
High	23	24	22	14	20	18	121
College	12	6	8	12	11	7	54
Total	103	100	100	92	95	83	573(100)
	201 (35)		191 (33)		181 (32)		

Legend: m-Males; f-Females; (%).

It can be observed that this is a balanced sample with almost half responding to each gender and roughly a third to each level of competency.

3.1 Gender Differences

Gender differences were explored by items. The only significant difference found was in teacher’s perception of the student who is pleasant to them, where female students ($X = 4.24$, $SD = 1.56$) scored higher than males ($X = 3.97$; $SD = 1.63$) $t = 2.07$; $p = .047$.

3.2 Perceived Level of Competence

As opposed to gender, perceived level of competence was a strong covariant of teacher perception. For every item, ANOVAs demonstrated significant differences between perception of the student and the pre-established academic competency level. Table 4 illustrates these results.

Social positive perceptions ($X = 27$) were higher than intellectual perceptions ($x = 26.07$). Data suggest that, in general, perceptions of both intellectual and social abilities of students seem to be higher in students with high academic competency than with low ones. However, differences in intellectual and social perceptions prevail. While positive perceptions of intellectual abilities seem to be directly proportional in 4 of 6 scales, social abilities show consistently higher scores in the average students than either low or high performing students, in 6 of the 6 items considered. Figure 1 illustrates these trends.

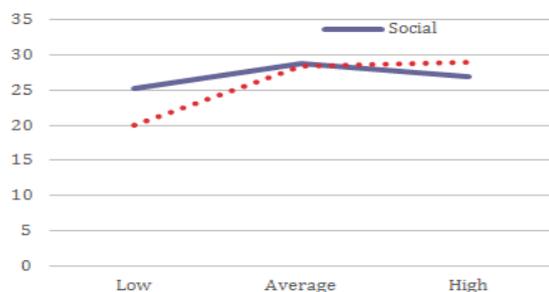


Figure 1. Scores by level of perception.

Although across grade levels expectations may vary, one way ANOVA fail to show statistically significant differences. Figure 2, however, shows that social expectations are consistently higher and that positive expectations tend to diminish at college level.

When the level of competency was controlled, in this study teachers were asked to evaluate a student from low, average, or high scholastic competence. Differences in teacher perceptions (an eventually expectations) were found.

Table 4. Scores per item by level of competency.

	Level of Competency			<i>F</i>	<i>p</i>
	Low	Average	High		
<u>Intellectual</u>					
Intelligent	4.27 (1.55)	4.78 (1.07)	5.04 (1.27)	16.63	.001
Reasonable	4.01 (2.58)	4.77 (1.01)	4.83 (1.44)	12.25	.001
Ideas	4.05 (1.54)	4.87 (1.03)	4.82 (1.42)	22.32	.001
Memory	3.74 (1.71)	4.55 (1.13)	4.84 (1.74)	28.11	.001
Learn	3.49 (1.72)	4.57 (1.02)	4.72 (1.50)	41.02	.001
Communication	4.02 (1.55)	4.87 (1.15)	4.67 (1.45)	19.68	.001
<u>Social</u>					
Friendly	4.66 (1.29)	5.09 (1.01)	4.82 (1.33)	4.88	.008
Nice	4.56 (1.20)	5.06 (1.03)	4.91 (1.23)	9.62	.001
Humor	4.38 (1.33)	5.14 (3.64)	4.59 (1.36)	5.34	.005
Pleasant	3.54 (1.67)	4.52 (1.21)	4.28 (1.71)	21.59	.001
Popular	3.94 (1.62)	4.43 (1.35)	4.10 (1.56)	5.85	.003
Friendly	4.16 (1.31)	4.56 (1.05)	4.28 (1.43)	6.20	.002

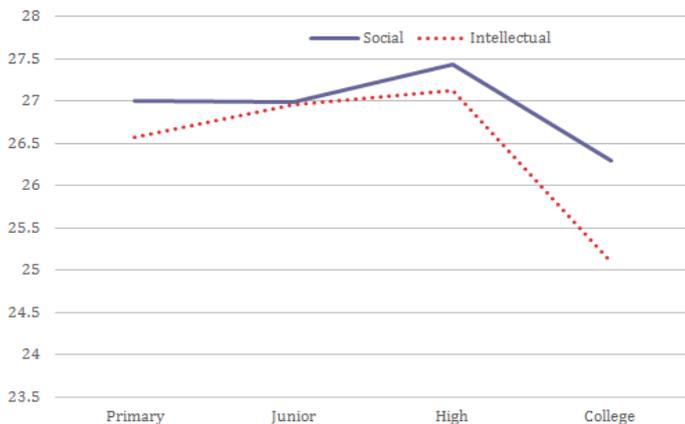


Figure 2. Scores by grade level.

4. Discussion

Data suggest few or non-existent gender differences in how teachers perceive students in general. This is consistent with Sanchez and Iber (2017) who found that the only variable affecting Mexican teachers' perceptions of student academic potential was the socio-economic status of the student. The higher the social and economic conditions of the student, the higher the expectations teachers hold toward student achievement.

In general, there is a positive correlation between student level of competency and positive perceptions from the teacher. Intellectual traits were positively correlated with the level of competency. However, emotional and social positive traits were perceived as better in average students than in either in low or high competence students.

From a theoretical perspective, findings support the notion of analyzing teachers' perceptions in two broad categories: social and intellectual; and to explore further how these two dimensions regulate teachers' perception, since they have distinct origins, consequences, and implications for the educational process.

Rather than studying perceptions in general, consideration of these two different dimensions may convey interesting implications for assessment and intervention. In addition, both dimensions constitute the basis of mental health principles -lieben und arbeiten- that are rarely considered in the educational process.

5. Conclusion

Findings have implications for teacher training. Indeed, Mexican teachers should learn more on how some students' characteristic may influence their perception of students, whereas others might not have an effect in the educational process. This is the case of level of academic competency that seems to be influential in Mexican teachers.

Although perceptions and expectations have been an old topic of educational research, it seems that revisiting this topic, and particularly in Mexico, may be worthwhile in a country with changing views on gender and novel curricular trends in the different educational levels. New generations of teachers being incorporated in the school system every year must be trained based on fresh empirical evidence of teacher practice.

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