

## **On the Effect of Teachers' Ethnic Awareness on Learners' Achievement: The Case of Iranian High School Students**

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### **Abstract**

*Being informed by the great repercussions awareness of ethological axioms would produce for education, in general and ethnically susceptible arenas, in particular, the researchers in the current study strived to investigate Iranian high school teachers' perceptions of their strengths and deficiencies for working with and meeting the needs of students from diverse cultural and ethnic backgrounds. In simpler terms, the study at hand was after finding the effect of high school teachers' ethnic awareness on learners' achievement. To this end, 20 high school teachers (both Kurdish and Turkish) along with 381 (Turkish and Kurdish) second grade high school students were selected as the study participants. The subject selection process was carried out in a range of different high schools across two cities in West Azerbaijan, i.e. Miandoab and Boukan. The major data collection instrument utilized was scale of awareness and personal beliefs developed by Ladson-Billings (1994a,b), which was based on Alabama Quality Teaching Standards and comprised 22 Likert-type items, intended to tap the participants' perceived awareness of the requirements for teaching children from diverse cultural backgrounds. Furthermore, to be able to tap the influence of teachers' ethnic awareness on learners' general achievement, the learners' scores on the final English achievement test were gathered. As the final analysis of results through one-way ANOVA and LSD test revealed, the learners' performance was found to be highly affected by the teachers' level of ethnic awareness.*

**Key Words:** ethnic awareness, ethnicity, Iranian high school learners

### **1. Introduction**

#### **1.1 Prologue**

Though the commonplace notion of ethnicity among the laymen is founded on the varying degrees of difference between the dominant and non-dominant groups (Grant & Ladson-Billings, 1997) "an ethnic group is usually established when a group of people view themselves as having common attributes and who are willing to call themselves an ethnic group or are labeled as an ethnic group by the dominant society" (Atwater, Freeman, Butler & Draper-Morris, 2010, p.290). According to Mickelson (2003) "Ethnicity relates to national ancestry and signifies the cultural, linguistic, and historical differences among groups." The main underlying tenets of ethnicity, as he claims, "are the beliefs on the part of people who identify with an ethnic group that they descend from common ancestors, share a common culture with coethnics, and choose to identify with that ethnic group" (p. 1054). Regardless of the attempts targeted toward the eradication of socio-cultural inequities, social class continues to feature as one of the pivotal factors, in manifold educational arenas, determining the learners' acceptance by the community in which they are located and hence their access to knowledge and learning opportunities is thought to be configured, to a considerable extent, by their social class membership.

In order to cater for 'culturally responsive teaching' (as Atwater, et al., 2010 term it), that is the kind of instructional trend which takes account of cultural facets of learning and strives to merge cultural axioms with the general pedagogical endeavors, it would prove beneficial to move in line with the guidelines put forth by Gay (2002); thus, to teach effectively, teachers need to possess:

- (a) a developed cultural diversity knowledge base,
- (b) the capability to develop culturally relevant curricula,
- (c) the ability to build a learning environment in which caring and cultural scaffolding occur,
- (d) the ability to conduct cross cultural communications, and
- (e) the knowledge and skills to match instruction to the students from a variety of cultures (cited in Atwater, et al., 2010, p. 291).

An ethno-culturally diverse nation, Iran hosts a variety of ethnicities such as Persians, Azerbaijani Turks, Kurds, Baluchis, and the Turkmens. This phenomenon which can be referred to as multicultural and multiethnic community is a commonplace verity in Iran, as a result of which several points of interface are created between and among people of varied ethnicities. When it comes to the educational settings, these diverse ethnicities might bring about potential complications in terms of teacher-pupil intercommunications. To adopt Bowman's (1994) line of argumentation, "children from low-income families and those from some minority groups ... are more likely to drop out, be retained, and be placed in special education settings than nonminority children" (cited in Gorham, 2001, p. 5).

A noteworthy condition that arises in such instructional settings is the differential role of learners' belonging to dominant or minority groups in their general school/academic achievements. Dominant racial or ethnic group membership might, in turn, produce particular societal/educational privileges, such as access to better learning opportunities and a higher degree of solidarity, of which the minority groups are thought to be partially deprived. One of the most culturally and ethnically diverse educational arenas is the ELT context in West Azerbaijan province, where a wide spectrum of ethnic diversities exists. Thus, in cities where Kurdish language is dominant, Turkish learners lie at a disadvantageous position in terms of instructional opportunities, while in Turkish speaking cities the opposite condition is found to be at work. In other words, this mismatch between the instructors and learners' ethnicities and mother tongues is thought to bring about partial inequities in terms of the distribution of opportunities among learners. To be able to minimize the consequences of such impeding factors, teachers engaged with the career of teaching in ethnically diverse regions need to equip themselves with the required skills, knowledge, and attitudes in order to meet the needs of students with different ethnic and cultural backgrounds.

## **1.2 Statement of the Problem**

Ethnicity and ethnological perspectives are said to play a major part in learning and achievement of learners, particularly in heterogeneous communities, in which different minority groups are brought into contact with the members of the dominant group in the learning environment. That Ethnicity is liable to bring about unequal expectations or treatment (Roscigno, 1998; Steele & Aronson, 1998) is no question, yet raising the awareness of individuals toward such ethno-methodological factors, and opting for strategies which ensure equity and fairness, are thought to aid teachers and other educational stakeholders to partly avoid such pitfalls.

Being members of such an ethnically diverse society, the researchers in the current study wondered whether such a differentiation in ethnicities would bring about different levels of achievement in learners. Simply put, the researchers' principal postulation was that students who are different in culture and ethnicity from their own teachers may end up with low levels of achievement, whereas those who are the same in terms of culture and ethnicity are likely to attain higher levels of achievement.

In line with the main underlying tenets pursued in the present scrutiny, the following research question was formulated:

*Does Iranian Turkish and Kurdish teachers' ethnic awareness influence second grade high school learners' achievement?*

## **2. Literature Review**

Highlighting the salience of teacher awareness regarding the learners' diverse needs, Pettus and Allain (1999) persuade "classroom practitioners to be more responsive to an increasingly diverse population" (p. 651). In what she calls 'cultural competence', Ladson-Billings (1995) sets the foundations for a more culturally aware teaching methodology and holds that, "culturally relevant teachers utilize students' culture as a vehicle for learning" (p. 160). Another paramount issue for teachers involved with the education of ethnically diverse communities is their sociocultural awareness which is delineated as "the identification, acceptance, and affirmation of one's own and other's cultural identity" and "creates a genuine trust in the inherent quality of human nature that manifests itself as a teacher's respect and faith in all students" (Sachs, 2004, p. 178). Furthermore, as Hollins and Guzman (2005) argue, "We need research that examines the links among teacher preparation for diversity, what teacher candidates learn from this preparation, how this affects their professional practices in schools, and what the impact is on pupils' learning" (p. 512).

Contrary to what Adibi (2003) once maintained regarding the culture-bound nature of ethnic identity, contemporary research advocates the existence of multiple identities rather than fixed identities as a norm in the modern societies. Thus, in such a state of affairs, multicultural education which is aimed at raising consciousness and sensitivity toward different ethnicities plays a focal part. In Banks' (1991) view "multicultural education reforms the curriculum so that students view events, concepts, issues and problems from the perspectives of diverse racial, ethnic and social-class groups" (cited in Gorham, 2001, p. 29).

In a study on pre-service teachers' beliefs concerning the instruction of ethno-culturally diverse classes, Walker-Dalhouse and Dalhouse (2006) administered a 5-point Likert-type scale to Ninety two White pre-service teachers to gauge their awareness of ethnic and cultural issues in the ethnically diversified contexts. The final analysis of findings revealed an inclination toward the endorsement of classroom diversity among the pre-service teachers.

In another investigation of the type, dealing with Chinese inservice teachers' attitudes regarding cultural differences in educational settings, Yeung (2006) carried out a research with 100 Chinese participants, with the aim of comparing the attitudes of pre-service teachers in West with those in Hong Kong. Based on the findings of this study, the fundamental role of teachers' awareness of and attention toward culturally diverse and educationally disadvantaged students was underscored.

In a case study conducted on two science teachers' perceptions of 'otherness' and ethno-culturally responsive teaching, Atwater, Freeman, Butler, and Draper-Morris (2010) claimed "that even though the participants had different goals for their students, they were not responsive to some of their students because of the students' culture, race, and/or ethnicity" (p. 287). Seeking to analyze the degree of Jordanian instructors' familiarity with the concept of global education, Alazzi (2011) conducted a large-scale interview with secondary school social studies teachers. Successive to an in-depth analysis of the recorded interviews, he concluded that teacher had very little acquaintance with the axioms of global education.

In a similar vein, Brown and Barkley (2011) performed a research project with fifty-seven pre-service academic instructors who "were enrolled in a teaching diverse learner's course that incorporated multiple field experiences involving direct interaction with diverse learners." Based on the obtained results, they maintained that "participation in the course increased these pre-service teachers' overall awareness and willingness to work with diverse learners" (p. 1).

Finally, as Ladson-Billings (2012), one of the leading figures in research on ethnicity and multicultural education, contends, "Although education researchers understand that race is a problematic concept of spurious value, the concept persists in our research and scholarship" (p. 115).

## **3. Methodology**

### **3.1 Participants**

The target population of the current study was composed of 20 male high school teachers along with 381 male second degree high school students in four different ethnic groups (Kurdish teachers instructing Kurdish students, Kurdish teachers instructing Turkish students, Turkish teachers instructing Turkish students, and Turkish teachers instructing Kurdish students).

The participants came from a range of different high schools in West Azerbaijan, Iran. 50 percent of the aforesaid groups were in dominant group (Kurdish teachers with Kurdish students and Turkish teachers with Turkish students) and the other 50 percent were in non-dominant group (Kurdish teachers with Turkish students and Turkish teachers with Kurdish students). Tables 1 through 3 provide a more lucid illustration of the distribution of subjects within the two groups of participants based on ethnicity.

### **3.2 Instruments**

The survey instrument used in this study was the scale of awareness and personal beliefs (Alabama Quality Teaching Standard), developed by Ladson-Billings (1994). The module for teachers was a 22-item questionnaire. Participants were asked to respond to the items through the use of a Likert-type module ranging from 1 to 5 (1 indicating strongly disagree and 5 indicating strongly agree). These items collected participants' perceived competence or awareness for teaching children from diverse cultural backgrounds. In addition to the above survey instrument, the other instrument used in this study was the final achievement test, which comprised of 64 questions.

### **3.3 Data Collection and Analysis Procedure**

Successive to running the pilot test and gauging the reliability of the study questionnaire, four different ethnic groups were selected to participate in this study. The study was conducted within the participants' regular class time in the aforesaid high schools. At the outset, the teachers were requested to fill the questionnaire. Great care was taken to administer the tests in the best manner. Since the tests were held in separate classrooms, to provide a more natural and effective class environment, one of the researchers and his colleagues remained in the room during the administration. As a follow-up step toward the objectives of the study, the learners were required to sit an achievement test whose results were intended to provide the researcher with valuable data regarding the performance of different ethnic groups. The major statistical procedures run for the analysis of data were one-way ANOVA and LSD post hoc analysis.

## **4. Results and Discussion**

In line with the information presented in Tables 4 to 7, the teachers' ethnic awareness is found to significantly affect the learners' achievement level. Furthermore, figures 1 to 3 provide a more vivid illustration regarding the distribution of learners' scores on the achievement test. As Table 6 illustrates the  $p$  value for the effect of teachers' ethnic awareness on the learners' achievement equals .00 which is lower than .05, and hence points to the significant difference among the performances of four groups due to teachers' varied amounts of ethnic awareness. The results of the LSD test (Table 7) further corroborate this piece of finding.

The current study set out with the aim of investigating the possible effect of English teachers' ethnic awareness on high school learners' achievement. In general, teachers' ethnic awareness and personal beliefs were found to have affected the students' performance significantly. Yet, quite surprisingly, the students in non-dominant groups (Kurdish learners studying with Turkish teachers and Turkish learners being instructed by Kurdish teachers) tended to score higher on achievement test in comparison with the students in dominant groups (Kurdish learners with Kurdish teachers and Turkish learners with Turkish teachers). The researchers are not sure how to justify this latter piece of finding as the opposite might usually be expected to be the case, owing to higher degree of solidarity between the students and teachers belonging to the same ethnic origins. Nonetheless, it can be said that the gained upshots, altogether, support those reported in the literature on the positive effect of (English) teachers' ethnic awareness on the achievement of learners such as the work of Atwater, Freeman, Butler, and Draper-Morris (2010).

## **5. Concluding Remarks**

As multiculturalism seems to have changed to a norm in most educational settings all over the globe, teachers' ignorance of the key role it can play in creating a responsive, reflective and constructive learning environment for learners of varied origins might bring about irreversible negative consequences. Modern-age teachers need to grow the skills required for dealing with the needs of learners in ethno-culturally diverse educational contexts. Gaining cultural competence and ethnic as well as sociocultural awareness might feature as the major prerequisites for an instructor who is engaged with the prickly task of teaching learners of varied ethnicities.

The current study was an attempt to depict the effect of teachers' ethnic awareness on the learners' educational achievement.

Based on the findings, the significant role of this crucial factor among the teacher community on learners' achievement was substantiated. In tandem with the obtained results, it can be argued that ethno-culturally aware teachers are liable to minimize the losses minority groups might suffer from as a result of the teachers' biased behavior in the classroom. The teacher who is aware of his/her learners' diverse needs emanating from their distinct ethnicities is better equipped to handle the provision of more equitable opportunities for all the class members regardless of their origin. After all, it is hoped that the findings gained in the current study will help partly alleviate the current pitfalls in the education of diverse ethnic groups.

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**Table 1** Frequency Distribution and Percentages of Teachers Based on Ethnicity

Teacher	Frequency	Percentage
Kurdish	10	50
Turkish	10	50
Total	20	100

**Table 2** Frequency Distribution and Percentages of Students Based on Ethnicity

Student	Frequency	Percentage
Kurdish	209	54.9
Turkish	172	45.1
Total	381	100

**Table 3** Frequency Distribution and Percentages of Students Based on Group

Ethnic Group	Frequency (student)	Percentage
A (Kurdish teacher with Kurdish student)	126	33.1
B (Kurdish teacher with Turkish student)	51	13.4
C (Turkish teacher with Kurdish student)	83	21.8
D (Turkish teacher with Turkish student)	123	31.8
Total	381	100

**Table 4** Distribution of students' scores

Statistics- Group	N	Mean	STD
A (Kurdish teacher with Kurdish student)	126	13.15	2.3
B (Kurdish teacher with Turkish student)	51	13.35	1.9
C (Turkish teacher with Kurdish student)	83	12.26	2.4
D (Turkish teacher with Turkish student)	121	11.90	2.3
TOTAL	381	12.59	2.3

**Table 5** Kurdish and Turkish Teachers' Ethnic Awareness

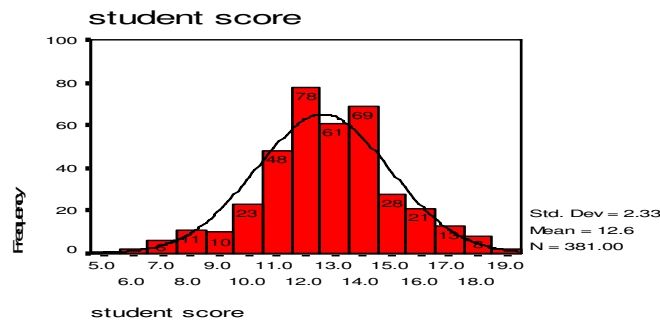
Ethnic-Statistics	Mean	Median	Std	Skewedness	Range	Min	Max	Q1	Q2	Q3
Kurdish	12.6	12	1.8	-0.06	6	10	15	11.75	12	14.25
Turkish	13	13	1.6	-1.72	6	9	15	12.75	13	14

**Table 6** Summary of ANOVA Test

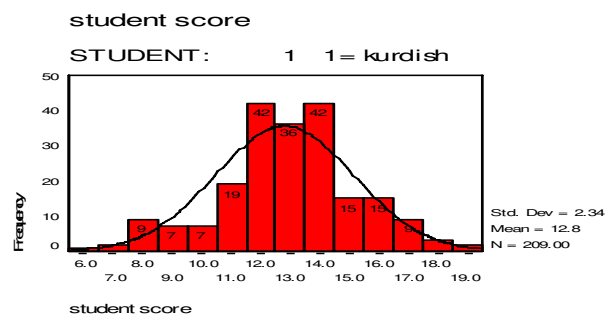
SCORE OF VARIATION	SUM OF SQUARES	DF	MEAN SQUARE	F	SIG
BETWEEN GROUPS	136.2	3	45.4	8.85	.000
WITHIN GROUPS	1933.3	377	5.2		
TOTAL	2069.5	380			

**Table 7** Post Hoc LSD (Multiple Comparisons)

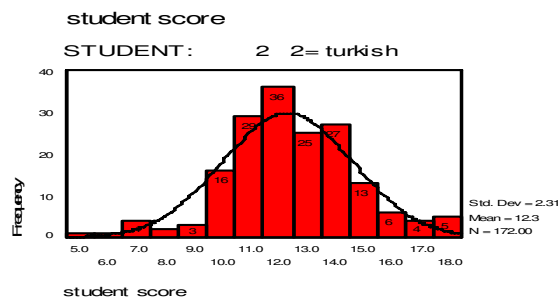
Independent Variable: Student Group		MEAN DIFFERENCE	SIG
KK(A)	KT	-0.20	.596
	TK	0.9*	.006
	TT	1.25*	.000
KT(B)	KK	0.20	.596
	TK	1.1*	.007
	TT	1.45*	.000
TK (C)	KK	-0.9*	.006
	KT	-1.1*	.007
	TT	0.36	.263
TT(D)	KK	-1.25*	.000
	KT	-1.45*	.000
	TK	-0.36	.263



**Figure 1** Distribution of Students' Scores on English Achievement Test



**Figure 2** Distribution of Kurdish Students' Scores on English Achievement Test



**Figure 3** Distribution of Turkish Students' Score on English Achievement Test