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Examining Students' Perceptions of Effective School Characteristics in Relation withCertain Variables

Abstract

Education is one of the oldest activities in mankind history. In practice, it is divided into two as formal and informal education. The ultimate goal of schools is student learning. The aim of this study is to determine perceptions of secondary school students regarding effectiveness of their school in terms of effective school characteristics and to find out if their perception varies depending on gender and grade level of students. Present study is a sample of descriptive research as it attempts to highlight relationships between circumstances and whether such relationships vary depending on certain variables. In the study, the Scale for Effective School (SFES), which is developed by Günal (2014), was used as data collection instrument. The validity evidences of the scale, which was administered to find out students' perceptions about school effectiveness, were obtained by Explanatory Factor Analysis (EFA) and Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA). As an evidence of internal reliability of the SFES, Cronbach's alpha coefficient for total scale was also calculated and found to be α=0.91. Study group was taken from 13 secondary schools in Trabzon province during the 2012-2013 academic year. As a result of the study, relatively the most important subscale of effective schools was found to be "Teaching Leadership". The second most important subscale was "Positive School-Parent Relationship".

Keywords: *Effective school, Effective school characteristics, Quality in education*

1-Introduction

Education is the oldest area of activity in humankind history. It has relationships with so many disciplines that it is a multidimensional concept which is difficult to explain. Despite lacking one single definition agreed upon by all parties, education is accepted as the "process of purposefully bringing desired changes in individuals' behaviours by means of their own experiences" (Ertürk 1988). In the society, individuals go through two types of education as formal and informal. Schools are the main places where formal education is carried out continuously. Formal education is a purposeful and planned activity performed in a controlled manner within a special setting through instructional activities. The special setting is the school (Özer and Atik, 2014)

The ultimate goal of schools is student learning. Such a service-related goal constitutes schools' reason of being (Hoy and Miskel, 2012; Senge, 1990). Schools are supposed to bring up students who are able to understand and meet the needs introduced by current age. Rapid changes in social and technological structure cause considerable pressure for restructuring of schools (Çelik, 2002), and society's expectations from schools is gradually increasing. Since schools are left behind to fulfil these high expectations, many countries have been attempting to change this situation. Driven by these attempts, educational scientists have initially set out to seek an answer for the question "What factors affect school effectiveness?" (Edmonds, 1979; Bashi, Sass, Katzir and Margolin, 1990; Sammons, Hillman and Mortimore, 1995; Heneveld and Craig, 1996; Townsend, 1997; Scheerens, 2005; Zhao, Lustick and Yang, 2005; Bergeson and Davidson, 2007; Yanık, 2008; Şişman, 2011, Lezotto and Snyder, 2011; Balcı, 2011). Effective schools aim at educating students at all levels with all skills.

Coleman, Pettigrew, Sewell and Pullum (1973) dealt "Equality of Opportunity in Education" in their study. Teachers, students and managers from nearly 4000 schools were included in the study which was conducted as a survey at national scale, and school characteristics were examined in those schools. As a result of the study, the distinctive factor in academic achievement was found to be learners' family and community rather than the school itself.

Following publishing of findings from Coleman and Plowden reports, it has turned out a main concern in educational environment whether or not schools really make difference; if so, what school characteristics lead to such difference; and under what circumstances the difference would be the highest. As a result, the effective schools movement was launched to show the role played by schools in education and instruction (Edmonds 1979, Sammons, Hillman and Mortimore, 1995; Scheerens, 1989; 2000, Bergeson and Davidson, 2007; Lezotte and Snyder, 2011).

Effective schools have typical characteristics in terms of management, teachers, students, school culture and parents. Effective school characteristics agreed by all researchers are given below (DCPS Effective Schools Framework, 2009)

1.1-Secure and Regular Environment

Maintaining security in school and feeling secure by students, teachers and other workers in school is a prerequisite for sustainable instruction at school (Pişkin, Öğülmüş and Boysan, 2011).

1.2.Teaching Leadership

Countries are revising their education systems in the direction of contemporary requirements. Within the framework of restructuring in education, school principal's teaching leadership is one important aspect attracting much attention.

1.3.High Academic Expectations

In effective schools, personnel hold the belief that all students are capable of gaining basic school skills and they reflect such belief.

1.4.Monitoring School Learnings

According to Lezotte (1991), students' academic achievement needs to be frequently measured by means of assessment and evaluation instruments in effective schools. The measurement results should be used for improving students' performance and developing curriculum.

1.5.Positive School-Home Relationship

There are a large number of scholastic and extra scholastic factors which affect students' academic achievement. Scholastic factors include physical, social and cultural facilities offered by school. Among extra scholastic factors; family affects students' both social and academic achievement (Aslanargun, 2007).

1.6.Learning Opportunities Offered to All Students

In effective schools, teachers allocate much time for teaching basic skills in classroom. At the same time, they need to spend extra time for backwards (Hopkins and Levin, 2000; Lezotte, 1991).

The aim of this study is to determine perceptions of secondary school students regarding effectiveness of their school in terms of effective school characteristics and to find out if their perception varies depending on gender and grade level of students.

2-Method

2.1-Participants

The study group was comprised of 4300 secondary school students attending grades 5-6-7 in 13 schools in Trabzon.

2.2-Instrument and Data Collection

For research objectives, a measure of perceived school effectiveness

was needed. For this, the scale for effective school-SFES- was developed by Günal (2014) which is a five- dimension rating scale. In this research, data on perceptions about school effectiveness were collected by SFES. The validity evidences were obtained by Explanatory Factor Analysis (EFA) and Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA). As a result of the CFA, good fit indices were found ($RMSEA_{(0.042)}$) $GFI_{(0.92)}$ and $AGFI_{(0.90,}$ These results supported the construct validity of SFES. As an evidence of internal reliability of the SFES, Cronbach's alpha coefficient for total scale was computed as 0.91. After scale construction stage, data were collected by SFES and also obtained students' GPAs from e-School database with schools' official permissions.

First of all, descriptive statistics were computed for subscales of SFES to determine the importance level of effective schooling dimensions from students' point of view. Independent t-test was applied to find out whether or not students' perceptions regarding subscales of effective schooling differ by gender. Also a one-way variance analysis (ANOVA) was implemented in order to find out whether students' perceptions regarding subscales of effective schooling vary depending on grade level.

3-Results

Descriptive statistics regarding students' responses to the statements under subscales of the Scale for Effective School (SFES) are given in Chart 1.

Chart 1: Descriptive Statistics for Students' Scores under Sub-scales of the SFES

Subscales		Median	Mode	Min.	Max.	ss	Range
Teaching Leadership	17.13	18	19	7	21	3.12	7
Parent-School Relationship	16.60	17	18	7	21	3.16	7
Secure and Regular Environment	9.21	10	10	4	14	2.05	10
Learning opportunity	7.60	8	9	3	9	1.48	6
Monitoring School Learnings	7.51	8	9	3	9	1.55	6
High Academic Expectations	6.81	7	8	3	9	1.70	6
Total Score in Previous Scale	64.70	67	68	27	81	12.92	54

As seen in Chart 1, "Teaching Leadership" (=17.13) was found to be the relatively most important subscale of effective schooling from students' perspective. It was followed by "Parent-School Relationship" =16.58). These were followed by other subscales as "Secure and Regular Environment" (=9.21), "Learning opportunity" (=7.60), "Monitoring School Learnings" (=7.51) and "High Academic Expectations" (=6.81).

Independent t-test was applied to find out whether or not students' average scores in subscales of the SFES vary significantly by "gender". The results of the t-test are given in Chart 2.

Chart 2: T-test results regarding female and male students' average subscale scores in the SFES

Subscale	Gender	N		ss	t
Secure and Regular Environment	Female	2210	9.41	1.92	6.38*
	Male	2250	9.02	2.17	
Teaching Leadership	Female	2210	17.49	2.94	7.63*
	Male	2250	16.78	3.25	
Learning opportunity	Female	2210	7.68	1.37	4.56*
	Male	2250	7.48	1.55	
High Academic Expectations	Female	2210	6.97	1.63	5.96*
	Male	2250	6.66	1.75	
Monitoring Students Learnings	Female	2210	7.67	1.45	7.02*
	Male	2250	7.35	1.62	
Parent-School Relationship	Female	2210	16.83	3.03	5.36
	Male	2250	16.33	3.26	

$p \leq .05*$

According to the independent t-test results in Chart 2; there was found a significant difference between average scores of "Female" and "Male" students in all subscales of the SFES except in "Parent-School Relationship". It was found out that average scores obtained by females were significantly higher than males in subscales as "Secure and Regular Environment", "Teaching Leadership", "Learning opportunity", "High Academic Expectations" and "Monitoring School Learnings". In other words, according to female students, school is perceived to be more effective than by males except in the subscale "Parent-School Relationship".

Also results of the one-way variance analysis (ANOVA) which shows if there is significant difference between students' perceptions regarding subscales of effective schooling by their grade level are given in Chart 3.

Chart 3: Results of ANOVA Testing Difference of Students' Scores in SFES Subscales by Grade Level

	Grade Level	N		ss	F	p	Difference (Scheffe $p \leq .05$)
Secure and Regular Environment	(1) 5th Grade	1040	9.63	1.88	20.53		**1-2,3,4**
	(2) 6th Grade	1040	9.06	1.90			
	(3) 7th Grade	1024	9.19	2.03		0.00*	
	(4) 8th Grade	1360	9.02	2.26			
Teaching Leadership	(1) 5th Grade	1040	18.19	2.77	72.81		**1-2,3,4** **2-3,4**
	(2) 6th Grade	1040	17.36	2.70			
	(3) 7th Grade	1024	16.71	3.20		0.00*	
	(4) 8th Grade	1360	16.45	3.37			
Learning opportunity	(1) 5th Grade	1040	7.90	1.33	59.13		**1-3,4** **2-3,4** **3-4**
	(2) 6th Grade	1040	7.85	1.29			
	(3) 7th Grade	1024	7.45	1.44		0.00*	
	(4) 8th Grade	1360	7.23	1.62			
High Academic Expectations	(1) 5th Grade	1040	7.32	1.68	46.72	0.00*	**1-2,3,4** **2-3,4**
	(2) 6th Grade	1040	6.82	1.62			
	(3) 7th Grade	1024	6.56	1.69			
	(4) 8th Grade	1360	6.61	1.69			

Monitoring School Learnings	(1) 5th Grade	1040	8.08	1.32	106.79*		**1-2,3,4**
	(2) 6th Grade	1040	7.71	1.40		0.00*	**2-3,4**
	(3) 7th Grade	1024	7.36	1.53			**3-4**
	(4) 8th Grade	1360	7.03	1.66			
Par-ent-School Relation-ship	(1) 5th Grade	1040	17.23	3.03	26.16*		**1-2,3,4**
	(2) 6th Grade	1040	16.67	2.92		0.00*	**2-4**
	(3) 7th Grade	1024	16.45	3.19			**3-4**
	(4) 8th Grade	1360	16.10	3.31			

p≤.05*

As seen in Chart 3, students' perceptions regarding effective schooling differ in all subscales by their grade level. It was found out that fifth grade students have a significantly higher level of perception regarding subscales of "Effective School" than the sixth, seventh and eighth grade students. Specifically, perceptions of the students in the sixth grade were found significantly higher than those of the seventh and eighth graders under the subscale "Teaching Leadership". In the light of these findings, the students in the eighth grade have the lowest degrees of perceived "Teaching Leadership". As a summary, students' perceptions regarding subscales of effective schooling decrease as grade level increases.

4-Discussion

'Teaching Leadership' is perceived relatively more effective by students. It is one of the most important subscales for effective schools movement. Lezotte and Snyder (2011) underline principals' teaching leadership role and their transferring such a mission to their staff, students and parents in an effective and continuous manner in effective schools. School leaders have a particularly important role to play in offering high-quality education. Schools are complex organizations

where strong leadership support is needed (OECD, 2009; Lezotte, 1991). The second effective subscale was "Parent-School Relationship" from students' point of view. Though schools are mainly held responsible for preparing the circumstances and mind-set for students' achieving in school, it is a fact that the responsibility should be shared by other stakeholders today (Beydoğan, 2006). It is possible to mention many scholastic and extra scholastic factors affecting students' academic achievement. Among extra scholastic factors, family plays an important role in both social and academic achievement of students (Aslanargun, 2007). Lezotte (1991) points out those parents need to understand and support the main mission of schools in an effective school.

According to students' perceptions, the least effective subscale was 'High Academic Expectations'. In effective schools, personnel believe that all students have the capability to acquire basic schooling skills and show such belief. Besides, personnel hold the belief that they are capable of helping all students acquire such proficiency (Lezotte and Snyder 2011). This subscale was perceived as the least effective subscale by students, which requires questioning the student-teacher relationships in schools. High academic expectations play a crucial role in effective schools (Edmonds, 1979). In a study carried out in two schools in New York in 1974, Edmonds found out that in high performing schools, teachers and principals have high academic expectations for students; while personnel in low performing schools are pessimistic about their capability of affecting student success. Rosenthal and Jacobson (1968) found after hundreds of trial that teacher expectations are influential on student performance.

Female students perceive school more effective than males in all subscales other than "Parent-School Relationship". In addition, students' attitude regarding school might affect their positive perception of school. In a study by Sözbilir, Akıllı and Ozan (2010), female students were found to have higher attitudes regarding their school than males.

It was seen that students' perceptions regarding subscales of effective schooling decrease as grade level increases. Due to the fact that students go to other educational institutions for exam preparation after the sixth grade, it can be inferred that they gradually become distant from school and schooling culture. The frequency of attending such educational institutions for high school and university entrance ex-

aminations increases in parallel with increasing grade level (Siyaset, Ekonomi ve Toplum Araştırmaları Vakfı [SETA] 2011). Furthermore, students' attitude towards school can also affect their perception of effective schools. In a study by Sözbilir, Akıllı and Ozan (2010), students' negative attitudes towards school were found to increase as their grade level increases. It suggests that students' positive attitude towards school decreases as their grade level increases. They found a wide gap between students' attitude towards school in elementary and secondary grades. It can be suggested that the direction of students' attitude towards school might account for such a result.

5-Conclusions and Suggestions

In this study, 'Teaching Leadership' was found to be the most effective subscale according to students' perceptions. On the other hand, the least effective subscale was found as 'High Academic Expectations'. Thus, schools might hold several activities to improve this subscale. Teachers, school principals and parents' high academic expectations regarding students and their expressing such expectations might have an effect on positive sense of self and self-confidence of students. Therefore, guidance services in schools can give seminars on students' psychology, positive sense development, self-confidence and self-efficacy targeting school principals, teachers and parents. Perceived subscales of effective schooling were found to vary significantly by gender. Female students obtained higher scores than males in such subscales as "Safe and Regular Environment", "Teaching Leadership", "Learning Opportunity", "High Academic Expectations" and "Monitoring School Learnings" at significant level. The reason for relatively lower scores obtained by male students regarding effective schools can be investigated via focus group discussion. Can we suggest that students' preparing for high school entrance examinations has been influential on relatively lower levels of perceived school effectiveness against increasing grade levels? In-depth focus group discussions can be held on this proposition. School management can organize various social activities inside and outside school so that students can feel attached to school and like the school. Lastly, in relation with students' preparing for high school entrance examinations, they can be supported with classroom teaching supplementary activities so that they can be less prone to go to other educational institutions than school.

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