

# **Geography teacher quality and effectiveness: Lower Secondary School Students' points of view**

**Dr. Klonari Aikaterini**

*Lecturer, Department of Geography, University of the Aegean, Greece  
aklonari@geo.aegean.gr*

## **Abstract**

Since the middle of the twentieth century the issues of teacher quality and effectiveness have attracted the attention of the educational community. As a result a wide range of studies have focused on this issue and have approached the topic by establishing categories of teacher characteristics, viewed mainly from the perspective of adult-teachers, administrators, teachers educators and educational researchers. There are, however, a limited number of studies that focus on geography teacher effectiveness from the perspective of students. This qualitative research approached and interviewed 8<sup>th</sup> grade Lower Secondary School students on Lesbos island, in order to explore their understanding of geography teacher effectiveness. Findings suggest that students concentrate on the issues of geography knowledge and pedagogy, while the more technical dimensions of geography teaching also attract their attention. Student perspectives, however, retain a humanistic vision of teaching and learning. Students want teachers who care and respect them, who help them learn and make learning interesting and fun.

Keywords: Geography, Teacher quality, Students perceptions

## **Introduction**

In recent years, one of the most important goals of teachers' education is to prepare "effective" teachers, who are able to facilitate learning for all students. This issue indeed incorporated in the program of study in every Education Department in the world. The achievement of this goal realised throughout the sufficient knowledge of different subject matters, various course work, field experience and practice in the classroom.

However, in Greece, this world standard for teacher preparation is not a reality as concern as the teachers who are going to teach geography in Primary and Secondary School. Most of them never have been taught geography during their studies; furthermore secondary teachers never have a course for pedagogical or didactical issues. From this point of view, in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, it is requisite a program studies' revision in the School of Education and other Departments (e.g. Geography Department, etc) in Higher Education in order to prepare quality teachers able to teach geography in primary and secondary schools in an effective way.

Additionally knowing that geography teacher quality related to students' achievements it is very important for the educational community and especially for the Program Study designers to know students opinions on geography teacher's effectiveness in order to take into consideration in the future changes of Program Studies, the content of the courses and the topics that are needed to introduced in these. Thus, all these studies provided my rational for engaging in research with children, while the model of characteristics of effective teachers provided the conceptual frame for the qualitative study reported here.

## **Rational for the study**

Teacher effectiveness has become a standard for teacher preparation (Saphier and Gower, 1987; Myers and Myers, 1995; Wong and Wong, 1998), a basis for staff development (Danielson, 1996) and a guideline for teacher evaluation (Flores, 1999). In fact, since the middle of the twentieth century the issues of teacher quality and effectiveness have attracted the attention of the educational community. As a result a wide range of studies (Borich, 1988; Burden and Byrd, 1994; Kauchak and Eggen, 1994; Danielson, 1996; Harris, 1998) have focused on this issue and have approached the topic by establishing categories of teacher characteristics, viewed mainly from the perspective of adult-teachers, administrators, teachers educators and educational researchers. There are, however, a limited number of studies that focus on geography teacher effectiveness and rarely have the perspective of elementary or secondary school students (Klonari and Koutsopoulos, 2005).

### **Aim of the study and research questions**

The aim of this study was to learn what Lower Secondary school students know about effective teachers and what they value in their geography teachers. For this purpose I formulated the following research questions:

1. How do students define an effective teacher?
2. What kind of knowledge do students have about the characteristics of geography teachers' effectiveness?
3. What qualities do students value in their geography teachers and why?
4. How might student knowledge of effective teacher be infused into the content and experiences of geography teacher education programs?

### **Method**

Primarily, a pilot study was conducted interviewing six students between the ages of eleven and fourteen years old (from 5<sup>th</sup> grade of primary school to 8<sup>th</sup> grade of lower secondary school). Students in this pilot have to discuss and express clearly their thoughts of *what good teachers had to know, do, and be like as people* to help them to learn. I discovered that the 8<sup>th</sup> grade students who had worked with a number of classroom and special-subject teachers in the course of geography (primary school teachers, teachers of science, literature, geologists, mathematicians, etc.) were able to consider questions seriously and objectively and were able to express their ideas about significant qualities and values that they expected in their teachers.

### **The sample**

Four considerations influenced my selection of participants for this study. They were: the initial findings from the pilot study, the location of my Department (on Lesbos island), the school authorities' permission for several public schools and the relevance of a variety of settings to them. The sample was 16 volunteers' students of eighth grade (8 boys and 8 girls between the ages of thirteen and fourteen) attended four different Lower Secondary Schools on Lesbos Island. Four students from each school were selected in such a way that the sample appeared to be representative of the population by gender, socio-economical status and school achievement (Nachmias and Nachmias, 1987). From all the participants only three students are ethnically diverse (1 has Albanian origin, 1 Moldavian and one from Ukraine) but all of them speak the Greek language very well.

### **Procedures**

Data were collected over a five-month period through interviews conducted in the schools. Interviews contained both closed and open-ended questions designed to elicit the children's understanding of effective teachers. The children were asked such questions as: "Over the years, who have been your really good teachers in geography lesson?" "What made them good?" "How do you define a really good/effective geography teacher?" "What advice would you give to future geography teachers about the ways they could become effective teachers?" All the discussions were written by the researcher in protocols (not be recorded on audiotape) and then were written up in new protocols, analysed and placed into categories for teachers' characteristics of skills, knowledge and attitudes. Initially, each participant was interviewed individually and after each child interview, all of the students in a school were brought together for a group interview where I could clarify and pursue new ideas, respond to comments and questions of the students. I conducted a total of sixteen individual and four group interviews. Students had the opportunity to call me by telephone whenever they wanted to add something to their responses or have me delete something later. Four of the sixteen students (3 girls, 1 boy) contacted me after I had left from their school.

Several checks were carried out while the study was in progress. Additionally, the participating students checked all the findings, interpretations and conclusions.

### **Limitations of the study**

This study has limitations that need to be recognised. First the number of participant was small, they were all the same age, and they come from a limited geographic area. Therefore, the nature of this inquiry raises several questions for future consideration. For example, how do the ideas of students about effective geography teachers change as they proceed through their schooling? What are the perspectives of students with special needs? How might teachers better use students' notions about effective geography teachers to improve teaching and learning in their classrooms?

### **Results**

The data of this study were analysed by codes and then shaped into categories according to the literature. Findings fell into two distinct groupings: information related to teachers' knowledge, skills and attitudes for geography subject and characteristics underlying teachers' personality.

#### **Teachers' characteristics**

##### ***Definition***

The essence of the definitions of effective geography teachers from students across the schools was described in the words of one girl from Mytilene who said, "*the most important thing teachers do is to help us learn geography*". Generally, learning was at the heart of students' explanations about their good geography teachers. For example, they noted that effective teachers like to help students understand and "*try to explain, more than once if it is necessary, what we don't understand*". An effective geography teacher "*has to know very well the content of geography can explain everything very well, use photographs, maps and other material (journal's articles, news from news papers, and media, etc) in teaching geography*". Finally an effective geography teacher is one who "*can make teaching geography fun so that students want to learn*". Furthermore is the teacher who "*is not bored teaching geography, she makes us be interested on geography and she is fond of teaching geography*".

As the conversations continued we discussed what students thought that teachers had to be able to do, know and to be like as people that help them learn geography. Through these questions, students guided to recognise specific knowledge, skills and attitudes that found and valued in their effective “geography teachers”.

### ***Teachers’ knowledge***

The students named several kinds of knowledge needed by effective teachers in teaching geography: knowledge of geography subject, knowledge of teaching methods and knowledge of students’ abilities. First, as noted by seven students (4 boys and 3 girls), teachers need to know very well all the issues, topics related to geography subject. *“An effective teacher has to know a lot about geography themes”, “My teacher does not need to look up the answers and she knows everything we asked”*. Also, five of the children (3 boys and 2 girls) repeated that effective teachers in geography has to have studied this subject, *“geography have to teach by geographers not by every specialty in the school”, “have to know how to explain and teach the subject”, “have not to ask from students only to learn by heart the content of geography textbook and have to use the appropriate educational material”*. But the most important area of knowledge of geography teachers, as defined by these students, is the knowledge of their students’ abilities and interesting. Seven students (4 boys and 3 girls) think that their teachers should know about their abilities, so teachers could help them in learning the difficult geography concepts, should know their interesting and what they like to do, so teachers should make geography a more fascinating subject (not so boring). Almost all students stated that a good teacher *“have to take into consideration that usually they have a lot of homework for other school subjects and have to help them to make most of the geography work during school time”*. The frequency and the scope of knowledge about students, mentioned by these children, indicate the importance they place on their teachers’ knowledge of them beyond the academic achievements.

### ***Teachers’ skills***

Students identified a number of teachers’ competences and actions in the classrooms that helped them learn geography. For instance, five students (2 girls and 3 boys) discussed their teachers’ abilities *to explain clearly geography textbook information and concepts, and students’ questions*, while four (2 girls and 2 boys) others noted their teachers’ willingness to address and answer questions. *To be able to explain and help students understand geography activities*, they thought (all of them) that teachers *needed to have good relationship with their students and communicate effectively with them*. Additionally they mentioned that effective geography teachers promote student centred teaching and cooperative learning. The most frequently mentioned skill, cited twelve times in both individual and group interviews, was that effective teachers make geography learning fun. According to these students, teachers make geography learning fun by using a variety of materials and strategies in their teaching. They use interdisciplinary approach, projects, fieldwork, play games, give choices and show tricks to motivate students. Furthermore they give examples from the media (international or national hot news), use songs and caricatures. As five of them said (4 boys and 1 girl) *“my teacher made everything exciting...he/she made everything a fun game. He/She made everything very interesting to me”*.

Finally, to be good geography teachers need to manage their classrooms effectively. Students explained that teachers must be attentive to behaviour, state clear what they want from students, have rules that all must follow and set a good example. *“He/she can’t necessarily be strict. He/she has to state firmly what he/she wants”*.

### ***Teachers’ attitudes***

Students also seem to be aware of their teachers' personal qualities, what kinds of people they are and how they treat them. This information was extracted from the following questions: "what is effective geography teacher like as people?" and "what adjectives would you use to describe effective teachers?" In these questions students over and over responded the significant behaviours they associated with their effective teachers. Seven students (3 boys and 4 girls) identified their effective geography teachers as respectful of students (they explained that *respect of students develops interest and motivation to learn*), while nine (4 boys and 5 girls) recognized them as fair and polite. "They don't have a favourite, they like the students equally" and "they are so kind to the students... they are really nice". Additionally seven students (3 boys and 4 girls) said that effective teachers are fun with a sense of humour. By the frequency with which these descriptions were mentioned in both individual and group interviews, became evident that students from these four schools care deeply about the kind of people their teachers are and they understood that teachers' attitudes affected students' learning and learning was at the heart of the geography education process.

## Discussion – Conclusions

The findings of this study demonstrate that students are able to define effective geography teachers by their characteristics and can argue what they value in their geography teachers (Table 1). This research shows that students want teachers who know to teach geography, help them learn geography and make learning fun. Further more students want teachers who care about them, and their interesting, who treat them with respect. Treating students with respect is the basis for the relationship-centred framework that focuses on fulfilling students' emotional needs to ensure that they want to learn geography.

Additionally students' interests focus on the human dimensions of their teachers also in geography knowledge and pedagogy, with attention on technical dimensions of teaching geography, as map's use, field work, geography games, etc. It is also important to note that only 2 students mention in effective geography teachers' skills the use of new technologies. Finally the knowledge, the skills and attitudes of effective geography teachers identified by the students in this study reveal common elements with the results of research reported by adults in the literature reviewed earlier.

Table 1: Characteristics of the best geography teachers

Characteristics	Frequency (%)
had good content knowledge	75
had good knowledge of innovative methods of teaching	75
made teaching and learning fun	63
had good explaining skills	63
was fair	56
involved students actively in learning – helped them learn	56
had good rapport with students	44
provided help when needed	44
respectful	44
was confident	44
had a sense of humour	44
made the geography lessons interesting	31
had well organised and managed classroom skills	31
displayed enthusiasm	25
loved his job and students	25

was polite	25
encouraged interaction	25

## Implications for teacher education

The findings from this study encourage us to trust the knowledge of students and learn from it. We see that what these students revealed has potential to inform geography teachers and teacher educators impact teacher preparation programs. Thus, if we would like to achieve the goal of geography teacher education to prepare effective teachers who are able to facilitate learning geography in all students, we must be informed and guided by the voices of students themselves, as they spend their time with teachers and they are the persons to whom teachers addressed in the education process.

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