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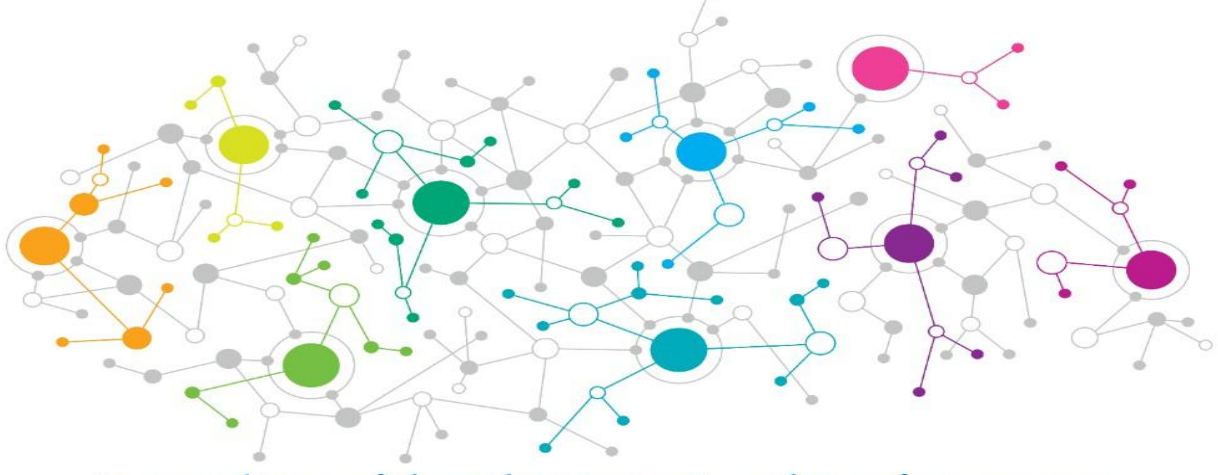
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Empowering Learners & Unlocking Their Potential

Towards a New Conception of Teacher Excellence:

Students' Perceptions of Soft Skills in Effective Teaching

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Abstract

This study investigates teacher soft skills and the interpersonal qualities that define teaching excellence. While an extensive body of research emphasizes knowledge, subject expertise and instructional methods, the present study aims to delve deeper into the interpersonal qualities and behaviours that students identify as qualifiers of excellent teachers. To attain this objective, the study uses qualitative survey questionnaires directed to 425 high school students across various disciplines in the orient region, in Morocco. Thematic analysis reveals key attributes such as communication, empathy, caring and relationship building along with pedagogical competence as central to the students' conceptualisation of teacher excellence. It is concluded that soft skills play a pivotal role in enhancing student engagement, fostering a positive learning environment and facilitating classroom interaction.

Keywords: Teacher excellence, Soft skills, teaching effectiveness, teacher education

1. Introduction

Recent incidents of violence in Moroccan educational institutions have triggered widespread national concern and revealed a troubling trend within the school environment. Data from the Moroccan National Observatory for Crime (2025) shows that students represent 7.2% of individuals prosecuted in violence-related cases, with secondary and high school students making up a substantial 81.9% of this group. What is more striking is that physical violence accounts for 90.3% of all recorded incidents, which target teachers specifically. Such alarming statistics bring into light the severity of the issue and point to a growing crisis in school safety and teacher well-being. At the same time, student-led initiatives aimed at expressing gratitude, such as the symbolic offering of candies and chocolate to teachers, indicate the complex and contradictory dynamic in contemporary student-teacher relationship.

The paradoxical reality that marks the current Moroccan educational scene seems to point to a deeper confusion about the status of the teacher and how he/she is being represented today. While still revered and valued by many, they simultaneously seem to be increasingly disrespected and even devalued by others. Ultimately, the figure of the teacher stands at the centre of a shifting cultural narrative. Amid this tense climate, questions arise not only about discipline and authority, but also about what makes a teacher excellent, and in the eyes of students, what qualities truly matter. Therefore, this article argues for a broader, more balanced vision of excellence, one that gives soft skills the central place they deserve in teacher education and professional development.

Many scholarly discussions of teaching excellence emphasise content mastery and technical skills (Jeschke et al., 2021; Putman, 2021; Shulman, 1986). These are undoubtedly important, yet, such discussions leave out what many students consider more indispensable: the human presence of the teacher and " the competencies applicable to the relational teacher-student communicative exchange process" (Kearney & and McCroskey, 1980, p. 533). The teacher's ability to listen, care, and connect could define the classroom experience as much as knowledge of content does (Lowman, 1985). Equally, important, emotional safety, mutual respect, and the ability to build rapport often mark the difference between an ordinary class and a transformative one (Wilson et al., 2010).

The present study seeks to contribute to the field of instructional communication. In spite of an abundance of articles attempting to examine classroom practices and understand how

communication shapes students' cognitive, affective, and behavioural learning (Hosek & Houser, 2018), instructional communication scholarship has faced furious criticism for its predominant reliance on descriptive quantitative methods (Sprague, 1992; Friedrich & Naubaum, as cited in (Worley et al., 2007). In response to this methodological limitation, this study opts for a qualitative approach to uncover recurring themes in students' accounts of what characterizes excellent teachers. Accordingly, the study places students at the centre of the discussion exploring their perceptions on this concept. It, therefore, seeks to answer the following research questions:

RQ1: *How do Moroccan high school students perceive the qualities that define teaching excellence?*

RQ2: *What specific soft skills do students identify as essential qualities of an excellent teacher?*

RQ3: *In what ways do students believe soft skills contribute to creating a positive and engaging learning environment?*

2. Literature Review

2. *Redefining Teaching Excellence*

Effective classroom instruction is commonly perceived to rest on the academic qualifications and technical expertise educators bring to their profession. The common belief is that the best teachers possess extensive content and pedagogical knowledge (Shulman, 1986). However, success in teaching is strongly dependent on factors beyond specialised knowledge, such as people's communicative behaviours and attitudes. As MacDonald (1991) notes, teaching is a character-intensive occupation - a kind of work that depends more heavily on the teachers' emotional and interpersonal resources than it does on his/her formal knowledge.

The conventional and common depiction of teacher excellence often emphasises the requisite academic expertise for instructing students. However, the personal emotion-driven attributes essential for fostering positive relationships within the school environment are generally overlooked. Recognising the importance of the association between soft skills and content knowledge in teaching, research within the field of instructional communication attempts to draw researchers' attention to the impact of teacher behaviours and communicative styles on students' learning in the early 1980s. Cornett-Devito and Worley (2005) emphasise that teachers should be competent in instructional communication. For them, instructional communication competence refers to:

> The teacher instructor's motivation, knowledge and skill to select, enact and evaluate effective and appropriate, verbal and nonverbal, interpersonal and instructional messages filtered by student-learners' perceptions, resulting in cognitive, affective and behavioural student-learner development and reciprocal feedback. (Cornett-Devito & Worley, 2005, p. 315)

As such, competence in instructional communication necessitates the indispensable link between hard and soft skills for teaching effectiveness. Effective teachers are those who are competent in terms of both knowledge and communicative and delivery skills. While knowledge includes content and pedagogy, skills are the ability to enact that knowledge in the instructional context effectively (Larson, et al., 1978). Cornett-Devito and Worley (2005) also stress the importance of verbal, nonverbal, and interpersonal communication skills as perceived by students, recognising their effect on students' outcomes.

Research on award-winning teachers has supported Cornett-Devito and Worley's arguments. Findings have demonstrated that excellent teachers are competent in content knowledge, pedagogy, and communication skills, including verbal and nonverbal immediacy behaviours. These teacher qualities raise students' motivation to learn, facilitate positive interpersonal relationships with students, and create a positive classroom climate (Worley et al., 2007).

Following the same line of thought and influenced by Goleman, (1995) research on the learnable aspects of emotional intelligence, Collinson (1999) redefines teacher excellence and distinguishes between three types of knowledge: ***professional knowledge, interpersonal knowledge,*** and ***intrapersonal knowledge. Professional knowledge*** includes subject matter, curriculum, and pedagogy knowledge, essential for effective teaching in teacher education. ***Relationship knowledge*** emphasises relationships with students, the educational community, and the local community. According to Collinson (1999), interpersonal knowledge is:

> Much more complex than basic acquisition of discrete social skills. It requires empathy to understand others, honesty and trust, respect, tolerance of different perspectives, the setting aside of self, good communication skills, and political awareness. Interpersonal knowledge involves maturity and wisdom. (Collinson, 1999, p. 4)

Excellent teachers, as Collinson (1999) emphasises, invest in interpersonal knowledge to establish positive and successful relationships with students, parents and colleagues. While interpersonal knowledge focuses on human relationships, ***intrapersonal knowledge*** represents

who teachers are. It includes an understanding of teachers' ethics, values and dispositions. Teacher ethics are divided into two types: 1) ethics of care (compassion, respect for self and others, empathy, giving to and receiving from others, courage, finding others' strengths, patience, self-knowledge, honesty/integrity responsibility to self and society, and hope/optimism and 2) Ethics of work (expectations/setting goals, pride of effort, dedication/perseverance, doing one's best, self-discipline (organisational skills)). Dispositions, on the other hand, involve a disposition toward continuous learning, curiosity/creativity, risk-taking, problem-finding and solving, searching for evidence and intellectual flexibility (Collinson, 1999).

Although interpersonal and intrapersonal knowledge are proven effective for successful teaching, they remain neglected in teacher training. The relational aspect inherent in the interpersonal dimension is neither a luxury nor an additional element for the instructor. The instructor's communicative pattern or behaviour should go hand in hand with transmitting knowledge and information. Communication, as is widely thought, is the link between knowledge and teaching/learning (L. McCroskey et al., 2002).

2.2. Soft Skills as a Prerequisite for Teaching Excellence

The literature suggests a plethora of instrumental soft skills that represent a rich source for improving instructional practices. They include many abilities, such as emotional intelligence, communication skills, empathy, and adaptability. Emotional intelligence, for instance, is about recognizing, understanding, and managing one's emotions and those of others (Goleman, 1995). Teachers with high emotional intelligence are more likely to create a conducive classroom atmosphere, build positive relationships with students, and manage classroom dynamics more effectively.

As a crucial component of emotional intelligence, empathy is equally critical as a skill. As Goleman (1995) advocates, empathy "underlies many facets of moral judgment and action" (p. 105). He states in this regard:

> There is an old-fashioned word for the body of skills that emotional intelligence represents: character [...] The bedrock of character is self-discipline. [...] A related keystone of character is being able to motivate and guide oneself. Being able to put aside one's self-centred focus and impulses has social benefits: It opens the way to empathy, to real listening, to taking another person's perspective. Empathy [...] leads to caring,

altruism, and compassion. Seeing things from another's perspective breaks down biased stereotypes, and so breeds tolerance and acceptance of differences. […] These are basic arts of democracy. (p. 285)

Influenced by Goleman (1995) research on emotional intelligence, most research on teacher soft skills has explicitly explored a set of skills necessary for teachers. These studies have attempted to identify and evaluate the essential soft skills integral to effective teaching practices and pedagogical success. One of the early studies in this area examines teachers' attitudes towards training teachers on social skills (Bain & Farris, 1991). According to Bain and Farris (1991) social skills training includes training teachers in certain interpersonal and prosocial behaviours, including conversing, dealing with teasing, handling embarrassment, listening, and responding to peer pressure. Results generated from structured questionnaires directed to secondary teachers indicate considerable support for integrating social skills training in the curriculum for teachers. The findings demonstrate that training teachers on these skills could improve the teacher-student relationship, the school environment, and student behaviour. (Bain & Farris, 1991)

Similarly, Attakorn (2014) has examined the soft skills of beginning teachers in secondary school. The data collected from questionnaires and interviews directed to 110 teachers reveal a set of soft skills that are deemed to be essential for teachers, namely communication skills, life-long learning and information management skills, critical and problem-solving skills, teamwork skills, ethics, moral and professional skills, leadership skills and innovation invention and development skills (Attakorn et al., 2014). Other similar studies have investigated a similar set of soft skills for teacher trainees. Results indicate that six soft skills are essential for teachers: communication skills, critical thinking and problem-solving skills, teamwork, lifelong learning and management skills, ethical and professional moral skills, and leadership (Hassan et al., 2015; Malik & Mohan, 2022; Ngang et al., 2015; Ngang & Chan, 2015). Research also has found evidence of a strong correlation between teachers' pedagogical knowledge and soft skills for teaching effectiveness, claiming that educators who possess these skills exhibit greater pedagogical effectiveness than those solely reliant on theoretical knowledge (Hanover Research, 2014).

According to Melser (2018), a range of soft skills are fundamental for teachers at the start of their careers. These include communication, confidence, enthusiasm, creativity, decision-making, teamwork and collaboration, stress management, positive attitudes, adaptability and

flexibility, time management, organisation, initiative, professionalism, and work ethic skills. Melser (2018) further argues that these skills help teachers establish positive relationships with students and make them successful in their classrooms. Although they are "the hardest to teach to pre-service teachers yet the most important component of getting a teaching job" (Melser, 2018, p. viii).

While a number of studies have explored soft skills that are instrumental for teachers, other studies have investigated the impact of these skills on the teaching and learning process. A bulk of the literature highlights the importance of teacher communication skills for teaching quality and effectiveness (Hoon et al., 2017; Ihmeideh et al., 2020; Khan et al., 2017; Malik & Mohan, 2022; Morreale et al., 2000; Muste, 2016). In fact, critical thinking and problem-solving have been identified as critical skills for managing challenging situations within the classroom (Alazzi, 2008; Bendl et al., 2023; Erdamar & Alpan, 2013; Gul et al., 2014; Li, 2023; Temel, 2015). Furthermore, teacher decision-making skills have shown relationship with classroom environment (Anderson, 2003; Blackley et al., 2021; Borko et al., 2008; Sarafidou & Chatziioannidis, 2013).

The importance of soft skills in teaching is more pronounced in English as Foreign Language (EFL) classrooms. The EFL classroom is a site of communication par excellence. Indeed, EFL teachers encounter many challenges, including language barriers, cultural differences, and differing levels of language proficiency among students. Effective communication and interpersonal skills are fundamental to overcome these challenges and establish positive learning environment. Research demonstrates that EFL teachers who possess strong soft skills and appropriate immediacy behaviours could significantly enhance students' language learning experiences and outcomes. Zhang (2022) has found that EFL teachers, who use inclusive language, provide positive feedback and exhibit empathy and adaptability are more successful in engaging students and facilitating language acquisition (Zhang, 2022).

The literature on teacher soft skills offers valuable insights into the diverse array of relevant soft skills for instructors. Most of the reviewed literature explicitly refers to practical communication skills; this is arguably due to the vital and intrinsic role communication plays in the teaching profession. It is argued that teachers with strong communication skills can articulate complex concepts clearly, engage students effectively, and adapt their teaching methods to cater to diverse learning styles. Practical, effective communication skills significantly enhance the overall learning experience of learners.

3. Procedure

3.1 Subjects and Data collection

The study was conducted in 9 out of 15 high schools in the directorate of Berkane. These schools are distributed throughout three local communities in the province, namely, Berkane, Saidia and Ahfir. Data were provided by 425 Second-Year Baccalaureate students in 16 classes who voluntarily completed the survey. 284 were female students and 141 were male students. The classes selected were randomly drawn from Mathematics, Physics, Economics, Humanities, Literature, and Life and Environmental Sciences streams.

Data were collected over five to six week period beginning in the 2nd week of the second semester. The selected timing ensured that students had sufficient exposure to their teachers since they had already completed the first semester with them. Students were informed that their involvement in the study was entirely voluntary, that their identities would remain anonymous, and that their participation would have no impact on their academic grades or their relationship with their teachers.

3.2.Instrument

Based on an inductive qualitative research design, the study utilised a single broad open-ended question as its main instrument. Asking students about "the qualities of an excellent teacher" invited them to reflect freely and express their own views based on their own personal classroom experiences. Importantly, the use of an open-ended question aligns with the principles of inductive inquiry, which emphasize grounding the research findings in the participants' perspectives rather than pre-established frameworks. Such method assisted "the researcher keep a focus on learning the meaning that the participants hold about the problem or issue, not the meaning that the researchers bring to the research or writers from the literature" (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 86).

3.3.Data Analysis

Thematic analysis was used to analyse the data qualitatively. Themes or patterns within data in thematic analysis in this research are identified within the "inductive" or "bottom-up" approach (Frith & Gleeson, 2004). This approach involves coding data without attempting to align it with a pre-existing coding framework or the researcher's preconceived notions (Patton, 1990). This emphasises the contention that the themes emerge naturally from the data rather than being

imposed by prior theories or expectations. To analyse the data, we followed Creswell and Poth (2018) the "Data Analysis Spiral" model for qualitative data analysis strategies. The model englobes 'preparing and organising the data for analysis; then reducing the data into themes through the process of coding and condensing the codes; and finally representing the data in figures, tables, or a discussion" (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 251).

4. Results

The first research question investigates the qualities that participants attributed to teaching excellence. Although we were theoretically sensitized of what constitutes an excellent teacher prior to data collection, participants were asked to share their opinions. Their responses revealed that their conception of an excellent teacher extends beyond subject-matter expertise. Indeed, it is deeply rooted in the teacher's human qualities and skills, ethical conduct, and the capacity to foster meaningful interpersonal connections.

4.1. Hard skills: Content and pedagogical knowledge

As we read the participants statements, we recognized that content and pedagogical knowledge were not consistent in students' responses. Only a limited number of participants highlighted this aspect. When describing this issue, participants underscored the importance of subject mastery, clarity, organization and fairness. One female participant reported in this regard, "A good teacher explains lessons clearly and simply. He knows the subject well and uses real-life examples to help us understand. He is the one whose explanations make the lesson easy to follow." Subject mastery, clarity, reinforced by personalizing the learning, reduces cognitive load and builds students' confidence as well.

Students also associated excellence with ethical conduct including both organization and fairness. One male participant noted "A great teacher is punctual, disciplined, and treats all students fairly and equally. He/she is committed to values, gives helpful advice, and serves as a model of discipline and integrity for his/her students." These comments highlight the importance of professionalism and the moral authority teachers carry, particularly in contexts where they serve as key adult role models. The later quality is further emphasized in some participants' responses. They viewed excellent teachers as ethical figures who embody a set of values that are worth emulating. One female participant stated, "A successful teacher acts as a

role model and is committed to ethics and values." What is implicitly stressed is that teachers are evaluated not only by what they say or do, but also by who they are in front of their students.

Additionally, students responded positively to teachers who involve them actively in the learning process. One participant noted, "A great teacher is someone who actively interacts with the class and involves students in building the lesson. He/she is the one who asks questions to keep us engaged and help us think more deeply about the topic." Another said, "When the teacher involves us, I understand the lesson better and feel like my ideas matter". He further commented, "It's easier to stay focused when the teacher makes us work together, ask questions, and share answers". Such practices, indeed, shift the classroom from a passive learning environment to a dynamic space of inquiry and dialogue.

4.2. Soft Skills: Interpersonal and Intrapersonal knowledge

The second and third research questions addressed the soft skills that students identify as fundamental qualities of excellent teachers and how such skills contribute to creating positive and engaging learning environment. Generally, all participants underscored the importance of communication skills. Students emphasized that teaching excellence starts with the ability to listen attentively and respond with care. A common sentiment was as one participant stated, "I think a successful teacher should listen to students without interrupting, be a good listener, answer our questions, and be approachable so that we feel comfortable and supported." This means that, communication is not merely the transfer of knowledge; but rather, a relational act that creates trust and psychological safety. When students feel heard, their motivation and engagement tend to increase.

Communication skills including empathy, respect and emotional safety were further reinforced in student's responses. Participants underscored the value of being respected and emotionally safe, as one participant commented, "The teacher needs to respect us and interact in a way that makes us feel comfortable. He/she also needs to understand and care about our feelings and never make fun of us." Another male student stated "I like teachers who respect student differences and avoid humiliation, teachers who understand their students and never mock them". As such, empathy and emotional intelligence are not peripheral attributes according to students, but they lie at the heart of the teacher-student relationship and contribute to a secure, supportive climate. Accordingly, an abundant number of participants stressed the importance of patience in the teaching process. In this respect, a participant said, "I like how the teacher

stays calm even when the class is slow to learn. It shows that he really wants us to succeed and believes in us". She further argued, "Some teachers lose their patience when students make frequent mistakes, and this makes us feel anxious and afraid to ask questions. It's something most students really dislike."

The teacher's ability to inspire was another central theme that was consistent in students' responses. Participants noted that encouragement and support has a lasting impact on learners' motivation and engagement, as one male student said, "I like it when a teacher encourages us to do our best and keeps us motivated to learn. When he/she supports us by recognizing our efforts, which builds our confidence and pushes us to get better." Moreover, a teacher's belief in students' potential influences their actions and attitudes in a way that makes their success actually happens, as described by one participant, who remarked, "A teacher's belief in a student's potential can ignite greater confidence and motivation, leading students to achieve higher academic and emotional outcomes".

Many participants shed light on the crucial role of adaptability and flexibility in the learning process. For them, excellent teachers are those who take into consideration differentiation within the classroom. Students described ideal teachers as adaptive and alert about students' needs, and generous with their time. One female participant remarked, "A good teacher is open to feedback and accepts criticism positively. She/he offers help even outside classroom time and adapts his/her teaching methods to make sure all students understand the lesson." Another said, "An ideal teacher is someone who notices when we are struggling, even if we don't say anything, and takes the time to explain things again or offer extra help without making us feel bad". Similarly, the importance of teacher's adaptability was further supported by another participant who said, "The best teachers are those who don't just stick to one way of teaching but change their methods when they see that some of us aren't understanding. They are always ready to give more of their time when we need it". As clearly mentioned in students' statements, adaptability reflects both pedagogical skill and interpersonal commitment.

Other influential qualities that were consistently reiterated among participants are passion and dedication. Students demonstrated their appreciation and admiration for teachers who display genuine passion for teaching as commented by one participant, "To me a successful teacher loves his/her job and shows real enthusiasm for his/her work. He/she enjoys interacting with students and brings passion and energy into the classroom, which makes learning more engaging and enjoyable." Passion, in this sense, becomes contagious and elevates the

educational experience as emphasized by another participant, 'You can easily recognize when a teacher really loves what he is doing. He makes the class more fun and interesting and make us want to learn, work hard and believe we can succeed".

For several participants, a cheerful and positive demeanour was frequently mentioned as a mark of excellence. One student reflected, "I think that a successful teacher brings a cheerful and optimistic attitude to the classroom. She has a good sense of humour and creates a fun, enjoyable atmosphere while still being respectful and assertive." Having a sense of humour as well as emotional warmth can reduce anxiety and make students more willing to participate, as reported by another female participant, "A teacher who smiles, jokes a little, and shows they care about students makes the classroom feel safe. It becomes easier for us to speak up, share our ideas, and take part in lessons without feeling stressed or scared". Not only had the teacher's sense of humour lead to student's willingness to participate, but also to developing student self-confidence. One stated, "When the teacher is friendly and makes us laugh sometimes, it really helps us feel comfortable. We are not afraid of giving wrong answers, and we feel more confident to join activities and talk during lessons".

Virtually all participants spotlighted the significance of approachability and friendliness to students' engagement. Teachers who are kind and approachable help bridge hierarchical gaps and reduce the distance between student and teachers. One participant stated, "If the teacher seems angry or distant, we get scared to talk or ask for help. But when the teacher is nice and open, we enjoy the lesson more and feel okay sharing our thoughts". Another participant extended the previous idea and emphasized that friendliness should be associated with assertiveness. He said, "A good teacher should be kind, friendly, and easy to talk to. He/she should treat students like friends and at the same time, maintain authority to earn his/her respect." This balance between responsiveness and assertiveness reflects a sophisticated emotional intelligence.

Finally, a strong classroom presence was also regarded essential. Many statements highlighted the primacy of teacher self-confidence. One female participant said, "If the teacher looks nervous or unsure, the students stop taking them seriously. But when he is confident and focused, it makes the whole class more serious too". This idea was further reinforced by another participant who stated, "When the teacher enters the class with confidence and speak in loud and clear voice, it makes us respect them more and feel that they are in control of the lesson" . The shared views on self-confidence expressed by many students were summed up by one

participant who commented, "A great teacher is confident and expresses ideas clearly and firmly without being arrogant. Moreover, he/she is assertive, remains calm, and stays in control of emotions, especially in stressful or difficult situations. He/she also has a strong presence in the classroom."

5. Discussion

The main goal of this study was to explore students' perceptions of the qualities that constitute excellent teachers. The findings reported in this investigation confirmed and extended previous research on teaching excellence and the important role of teacher soft skills in the teaching and learning process. They also confirmed that teaching excellence, as redefined by Collinson (1999) and McCroskey (2006), is not limited to the teacher's knowledge and pedagogy but also to other intangible qualities such as communication, empathy, confidence, flexibility among others. Specifically, not only had students perceive excellent teacher to be competent in knowledge, pedagogy and communication (McCroskey, 2006) but also in a set of intrapersonal skills (Collinson, 1999).

Students indicated that they are more engaged and motivated to learn, when they are taught by teachers who are competent in the subject matter and use clear language to deliver the lesson. They are also more engaged when their teachers treat them fairly. These results corroborate positively with Shulman (1986) conceptualization of content and pedagogical knowledge. They also confirm previous studies in the field of instructional communication on the role teacher clarity and classroom justice on student learning and motivation (Bolkan et al., 2016; Horan et al., 2010).

The significance of teacher soft skills was remarkably apparent in students' perceptions. The highest proportion of teaching excellence qualities was significantly attributed to the intangible, relationship and personal characteristics necessary to co-exist with students (Collinson, 1999; MacDonald, 1991). Students indicated that they learn more when their teachers listen to them attentively and care about them. They also emphasised that empathy, mutual respect, and emotional security are essential for fostering a supportive learning environment in which students feel confident and comfortable to express themselves without fear or embarrassment. Similarly, previous research has indicated that communication skills including attentive listening, empathy, and caring increase student motivation to learn (Comadena et al., 2007; Khan et al., 2017; Zhang, 2022).

Another interesting outcome in this qualitative study was students' preference of inspiring teachers; teachers who genuinely encourage their students to talk and generously support them. Inclined toward teachers of these qualities does not appear to be a question that worth additional investigation. As indicated in this study and previous studies on teacher immediacy, supporting students and encouraging them to talk is one of the abundant factors that influence the learning process positively (Allen et al., 2006; Andersen, 1979).

The findings also reinforce previous research that highlight the significant role of adaptability and flexibility in teaching effectiveness. These findings are consistent with Zhang's (2022) on the positive correlation between adaptability and student engagement and language learning. The findings also confirm Tomlinson and Imbeau's (2010) conceptualization of differentiation, in which they advocate for "a flexible approach to teaching "makes room" for students variance". According to them, "teachers are required to understand the nature of each of their students, in addition to the nature of the content they teach". Therefore, they "should continually ask, "What does this student need at this moment in order to be able to progress with this key content, and what do I need to do to make that happen?" (Tomlinson & Imbeau, 2010, p. 15). The participants' emphasis on the importance of being alert about students' needs and offering help and support even outside classroom time aligns closely with Tomlinson and Imbeau's principle. The results also corroborate with a research by Stronge, (2018) who supports the claim that effective teachers, exhibit flexibility in both instruction and classroom management. He argues that adaptability allows teachers to adjust lessons in real time, respond to unexpected challenges, and accommodate diverse learning styles (Stronge, 2018).

There does appear to be a consensus among students that dedicated and passionate teachers are successful teachers. Being dedicated and passionate bring energy, enthusiasm, and a genuine sense of joy to the teaching practices according to students. Given the similarity in results obtained by Day (2004) and ours, passionate teachers invest both emotionally and intellectually in their work, which in turn enhances teaching quality and improves student outcomes (Day, 2004). Additionally, the assumption that passion is "contagious" and could foster student motivation is remarkably supported by Frenzel et al. (2018). In their study on emotional transmission in classrooms, Frenzel et al. (2008) have found that teacher enjoyment and enthusiasm are strongly associated with student enjoyment, interest, and engagement.

What remains interesting is the students' perceptions that excellent teachers are characterized by a sense of humor and they have the ability to balance responsiveness with assertiveness. This

androgynous communication style which is marked by high levels of both assertiveness and responsiveness, has been associated with effective interpersonal communication across various contexts, including education (Thomas et al., 1994). Previous research demonstrates the positive effects of teacher humour, used appropriately, on student outcomes, including increased engagement, motivation, and reduced anxiety (Elkhayma, 2021; Gorham & Christophel, 1990).

Moreover, this study provides evidence which builds on previous research in support of approachability and friendliness in teaching context. Virtually all participants emphasized that teachers who are kind, welcoming, and emotionally accessible help bridge the hierarchical divide often present in traditional classrooms. This confirms the findings of previous research on the role of teacher immediacy on learning (Al Ghamdi, 2017; Christophel, 1990). Participants also highlighted that teacher appropriate approachability contributes not only to a more entertaining learning environment, but also to students' willingness to seek help, participate actively, and share their ideas without fear as found in Menzel & Carrell's, (1999) study.

A particularly compelling finding in this study is the consistent emphasis participants placed on teacher self-confidence as a core indicator of teaching excellence. Many students considered these intrapersonal qualities as foundational to gain respect, maintain order, and guarantee learner attention and motivation. This result supports existing research which, underscores the value of teacher self-efficacy and his/her presence in shaping student perceptions and classroom dynamics (Bandura, 1977; S.Yoon, 2002). Moreover, the concept of "classroom presence," while sometimes considered intangible, is closely related to teacher immediacy and nonverbal communication behaviours (Mehrabian, 1971; Richmond, 2002). Teachers who project confidence through posture, eye contact, vocal projection, and command of space often establish a stronger sense of control and emotional stability in the classroom.

6. Conclusion

On the whole, the findings of this study indicates that an excellent teacher is not defined solely by subject matter expertise or pedagogical skills. Instead, students emphasized a combination of hard and soft skills, with a strong focus on interpersonal and intrapersonal qualities. Excellent teachers as depicted in the present study are those who genuinely engage with their students, display understanding and respect, and adapt their methods to suit diverse needs. Furthermore,

teacher's ethical conduct and ability to create a supportive, emotionally safe learning environment was underscored. Not only have these qualities contributed to a positive classroom environment, but also to enhancing student motivation and confidence.

The current study has several instructional implications for both practitioners and policy makers. For instance, awareness of the significant role of emotional intelligence and soft skills could encourage teachers to develop instructional plans with more soft skills-oriented strategies. Additionally, training programs could fulfill this function by incorporating these components to equip pre-service teachers with the prerequisite interpersonal skills to engage students effectively. In-service workshops could also enhance in-service teachers who score low in these skills through continuous professional development training.

In sum, this study highlights the necessity of teacher training programs that move beyond traditional pedagogy. Professional development initiatives should include components on emotional intelligence, effective communication, and classroom management strategies that foster positive relationships between teachers and students. Therefore, the redefined conception of teaching excellence presented in this study highlights the pivotal role of both technical and relational qualities in teaching. By emphasizing the development of both hard and soft skills, educational systems can enhance teaching effectiveness and foster more engaging and supportive learning environments for students.

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