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# Perceptions of Children's Democratic Rights by Primary School Teachers

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## Abstract

*This study seeks to identify the perceptions of primary school teachers towards students, focussing on their perceptions of children as possessing rights. The research was carried out with 64 primary school teachers. 33 pairs of characteristics and four questions were used to determine the perceptions of the teachers about students; the characteristics and the questions are based on a thorough literature review. The study reveals that the teachers in general hold negative perceptions on their students and their rights.*

## Introduction

Education is a set of activities done to ensure that individuals participate in the social life. Education is essentially based on the principle of equipping the individuals with the relevant information and skills needed during the lifetime in the attempts of the society and the individual to survive. Within the framework of this principle, education starts in early ages and lasts through life. The individual is prepared for life under guidance by the parents. However, it is evident that the guardianship and guidance by the parents is not sufficient for an individual to integrate with the society and to survive. For this reason, education should be carried out by competent professional known for their expertise in their relevant fields in the institutions specifically allocated for educational purposes.

Education is a necessity, and individuals feel its absence for psychological and social needs for development and improvement. The physical, bodily, conscious, emotional, social and moral improvement of the individual is only possible through proper education. Education and accompanying training seeks to ensure that the individuals improve their potentials and become healthy and happy persons.

In democratic societies education is considered to be a right that should be recognized for all individuals and expressed as a service that needs to be offered all members of the society.

In the countries that adopted liberal democratic order, education fosters creative and critical thinking and supports the interests and abilities of the children. It equips them with a broad world vision and tolerance. The countries train the human work needed to ensure greater level of development via education. Therefore, educated people make contribution to effective use of national resources under a well-drafted plan. The country becomes richer and people become happier and more comfortable (Akyüz, 2001).

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Education is a necessity and requirement for the order, wealth and future of the society. At this point, the education and training of the children becomes even more important. Their education is taken under guarantee by the national legislations and relevant international agreements and conventions. Article 42 of the Turkish Constitution states: "No one shall be deprived of the right of learning and education. Primary education is compulsory for all citizens of both sexes and is free of charge in state schools. The state shall provide scholarships and other means of assistance to enable students of merit lacking financial means to continue their education. The state shall take necessary measures to rehabilitate those in need of special training so as to render such people useful to society." (TBMM) Obviously, under this provision, the state is obligated to provide the educational services.

The Turkish National Education Bill considers the right to education and equality in terms of opportunity and possibility in education as the fundamental principles of Turkish national education (articles 7 and 8). The bill defines education as a public service offered for use and benefit by all. The relevant section reads: "Equality of opportunity in education entails ensuring that all will be entitled to the same opportunities and privileges at the starting line, recognizing the opportunity for all to improve their abilities and supporting those who are deprived of financial means to get proper education." (M.E.B.)

In a democratic social order every child is entitled to benefit from education. This privilege is a right whose limits and framework has been identified and prescribed by laws.

Currently, educating all sections of society has become a major problem. In addition to the problem of training individuals who will successfully integrate with changing life conditions, particularly educating the risky groups becomes even more difficult. The children living in our country are also theoretically entitled to getting a proper education. But it is true that the kids are unable to appropriately benefit from the massive education offered in Turkey. The frequent problems encountered with the kids in regards to education include lack of attendance, quitting the school and complete failure in the classes.

To resolve these problems, the root source of the problems should be identified first. Teachers are the second most important actors after the parents in the education and training of the children. As persons who work to ensure that the students are equipped with the necessary skills and information needed during lifetime, the teachers show different attitudes vis-à-vis the students. This has been verified by various academic studies. Research (Öztürk, Koç and Şahin, 2003) seeks to identify whether the class teachers are discriminatory vis-à-vis the students, how the students have been affected by this situation and the consequences of these attitudes over the students' social and academic actions in the class.

The results demonstrate that 92.9 percent of the surveyed teachers develop discriminatory attitudes vis-à-vis the students for who they had excessive or low expectations.

Different attitudes and behaviors of the teachers stem from the differing perceptions in connection with the gender and ethnic background of the students. The stereotypes of teachers strongly affect the academic actions of the students (Gutmann, 1982).

This study seeks to review teachers' perceptions of students in their education, considering that teachers hold the second most important place after parents. The views of teachers on their students may affect their relations with students and their reactions to certain actions by the same students.

The education and training of the children is strongly affected and influenced by the views of the teachers in regards to these students. There are only a few academic studies focusing on the issues in Turkey. More importantly, there is no single study on the perceptions of the teachers in regards to the Roma students in the public schools. The present study aims to find out how the teachers employed in the primary schools perceive the Roma kids. The study will determine the negative and positive characteristics of Roma students based on the perceptions of the teachers.

## **Methodology**

### ***Participants***

Of the participant teachers in the survey, 36 (56.3 percent) were female and 28 (43.8 percent) were male. 38 participants (59.4 percent) were class teachers whereas the remaining 26 (40.6 percent) were subject teachers. The ages of the respondents range between 25 and 53. Their seniority in the profession greatly varies starting from two through 32 years.

### ***Material and Procedure***

A survey was conducted among respondents. The survey was prepared based on the literature review (Tezcan, 1974; Bacanlı, 1991; Paker, 2004) and subsequently run with the participation of 64 class and subject teachers following a preliminary trial among the same group of teachers. The survey includes a set of expressions on the negative and positive characteristics of the students as identifiable by the teachers and statements to determine the views of the teachers in the students. The scale has been shown to have high reliability coefficients (Kuder Richardson coefficient 0.94). Frequency and percentages have been used in the data analysis.

## **Results**

The characteristics picked by the primary school teachers based on their perceptions as obtained through the study have been illustrated in Figure 1 along the frequency and percentages.

**Figure 1. Findings on the perceptions of the primary school teachers in relation to the Roma Children**

Characteristics	n	%	Characteristics	n	%
Good	14	21.9	Untidy	56	87.5
Bad	30	46.9	Tidy	-	-
Hard working	3	4.7	Chary	12	18.8
Lazy	54	84.4	Generous	36	56.3
Warm	52	81.3	Brave	29	45.3
Calm	5	7.8	Coward	17	26.6
Charming	48	75.0	Emotional	46	71.9
Cold	9	14.1	Reasonable	4	6.3
Mannerly	4	6.3	Successful	4	6.3
Ill-mannered	45	70.3	Unsuccessful	54	84.4
Responsible	3	4.7	Rich	1	1.6
Irresponsible	56	87.5	Poor	53	82.8
Honest	6	9.4	Humane	19	29.7
Liar	48	75.0	Cruel	34	53.1
Sensitive	37	57.8	Respectful	15	23.4
Insensitive	12	18.8	Irreverent	39	60.9
Genial	49	76.6	Smart	15	23.4
Down faced	6	9.4	Dummy	21	32.8
Hostile	16	25.0	Strong	20	31.3
Friendly	25	39.1	Weak	20	31.3
Patient	4	6.3	Naïve	11	17.2
Impatient	54	84.4	Crafty	39	60.9
Dreamer	46	71.9	Contempt	8	12.5
Realistic	6	9.4	Greedy	43	67.2
Neat	11	17.2	Aggressive	49	76.6
Dirty	42	65.6	Easy	5	7.8
Reliable	5	7.8	Proud	19	29.7
Unreliable	49	76.6	Non-proud	25	39.1
Kind	2	3.1	Confident	21	32.8
Rude	49	76.6	Insecure	28	43.8
Talkative	46	71.9	Resolved	2	3.1
Quite	10	15.6	Indifferent	54	84.4
Inconsiderate	41	64.1			
Considerate	6	9.4			

According to the findings obtained in the research, the teachers employed in the primary education institutions perceive the Roma students as irresponsible (87.5 percent), untidy (87.5 percent), lazy (84.4 percent), unsuccessful (84.4 percent), indifferent (84.4 percent), impatient (84.4 percent), poor (82.8 percent), rude (76.6 percent), aggressive (76.6 percent), unreliable (76.6 percent), liar (75.0 percent), dreamer (71.9 percent) and ill-mannered (70.3 percent). On the other hand, the same teachers also identify the Roma pupils as warm (81.3 percent), genial (76.6 percent) and charming (75.0 percent). The findings show that the teachers in general hold negative perceptions on the Roma students.

A study by Enesco et al. (2005) done with the participation of the Spanish and Latin American children living in Madrid to review the ethnic perceptions reveals that the

general judgments with regard to the Roma were mostly negative. The study shows that the Roma get the highest points of negative judgments. The respondents defined the Roma as thieves (74 percent), filthy (68.8 percent), untidy (63.5 percent), evil (58.3), ill-mannered (57.3 percent), poor (56.3 percent), crook (52.1 percent) and violent (52.1 percent). The only positive characteristic referred to by the respondents in this study underlines that they are good dancers (33.3 percent).

**Figure 2. Findings on the willingness of the primary school teachers to teach the Roma Students**

With the Roma students	f	%
I do not like to work	5	8.5
I would like to work	26	44.1
It does not matter	28	47.5
Total	59	100.0

In the schools where Roma students get education, only five teachers (7.8 percent) indicate that they would like to work with the Roma students whereas 26 (40.8 percent) underlined that they would not be willing to teach these students and 28 (43.8 percent) stated that it would not matter at all. The findings show that the majority is willing to work in the schools where Roma children. Nicoale (2005) notes that the teachers will not be willing to work in these schools even if they will suffer from extreme unemployment.

**Figure 3. Findings on the perceptions of the primary school teachers on how much they love the Roma students**

Roma students	f	%
I love the Roma students	44	81.5
I do not love the Roma students	10	18.5
Total	54	100.0

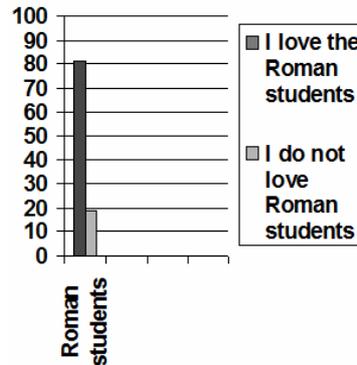


Figure 3 demonstrates that primary school teachers overwhelmingly like the Roma students. 44 (68.8 percent) out of the 64 respondents state that they like Roma students whereas only 10 (15.6 percent) say they do not love them.

**Figure 4. Findings on the perceptions of primary school teachers on whether Roma students would undertake further studies and receive education**

Roma Students	f	%
Would be able to study further	41	68.3
Would be able to study further	19	31.7
Total	60	100

Figure 4 shows that 41 (68.3 percent) out of the 64 teachers in the primary schools hold that the Roma students would study further while 19 (31.7 percent) are of the opinion that they would not further their education. The findings reveal that the vast majority of the polled teachers believe that Roma students will get further education and training.

**Figure 5. Findings on the perceptions of primary school teachers on whether it is possible to educate the Roma students**

In regards to Roma children	f	%
It is possible to educate them	50	86.2
It is impossible to educate them	8	13.8
Total	58	100.0

Table 5 shows that 50 (86.2 percent) out of the 64 respondents believe that it is possible to educate and train the Roma children whereas only 8 (13.8 percent) assert that it is impossible to educate them. The findings demonstrate that the vast majority of the teachers hold that Roma kids are trainable.

### Conclusion

The study seeks to identify the perceptions of primary school teachers in relation to Roma children. The research reveals that the teachers in general have negative perceptions on the Roma children. The defining characteristics of Roma students based on the findings of this study are irresponsible, untidy, lazy, unsuccessful, indifferent, impatient, poor, rude, aggressive, unreliable, liar, dreamer and ill-mannered. On the other hand, the same respondents also identify Roma students as warm, genial and charming.

According to the other findings in the study, a majority of the respondents are willing to work at the schools where Roma students attend. On the other hand, similarly a vast majority of the participant teachers underlined that they love Roma students even though they do not want to work at the schools with a substantial size of Roma student presence.

More importantly, despite that some teachers indicate they will be unwilling to teach at the schools with Roma students, almost all of the respondents state that they love Roma children. In addition, a vast majority hold that Roma children are competent and skilful to further their education and are trainable.

In conclusion, we could say that all segments of the society should be entitled to benefit from the right to education which is considered a democratic right in developed countries. Individuals should be more eager to ensure effective use of this right which is under protection by domestic and international legal arrangements. Most teachers underline that Roma students are trainable, further adding that they love Roma students. From this perspective, it could be said that the lack of attendance by Roma students and their low performance at the schools may be attributable to the reluctance of their parents. Roma students hold that school life is boring and the classroom activities are not interesting (Kyuhucku, 2000). To resolve the problem, teachers should be more concerned and sensitive to the needs and demands of Roma students.

In this study, the perceptions of teachers have been reviewed. In future studies, it could be useful to evaluate teachers and the school based on the perceptions of students.

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