Student Perceptions of a Good Teacher: A Comparative Study of Finland and Singapore

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Abstract

While teaching quality is often treated as a universal construct, student perspectives reveal nuanced and context-specific understandings shaped by national, cultural, and demographic factors. Recognising these differences is essential for aligning pedagogical practices with learner expectations. In this study, we examined students' perceptions of good teaching in Finland and Singapore and conducted a qualitative comparative analysis of 80 open-ended essays written by 16-year-old students: 40 from students in the Integrated Programme at a Singapore junior college and 40 from one Finnish secondary school. Through thematic analysis, we identified recurring traits and values that students associate with good teaching. Analysis of the Singaporean data indicated that sincerity, passion and enthusiasm emerged as the top trait students seek in a good teacher (n = 16). Finnish students emphasised a teacher's compassionate kind and cheerful attitude (n = 34), and attentiveness to student voices and opinions (n = 12). The findings revealed contrasting cultural orientations in how students perceive effective teaching. Singaporean students tended to highlight traits that reflect care, dedication and competence, suggesting a view of the teacher as a committed and nurturing professional. Finnish students, however, emphasised interpersonal dynamics and emotional presence, pointing to a more egalitarian and relational understanding of the teacher's role. The findings challenge universalist assumptions about teaching excellence and underscore how educational values and societal norms shape students' expectations of pedagogical excellence. By foregrounding student perspectives, this research contributes to a more inclusive and context-sensitive understanding of quality teaching.

Keywords: good teaching, cross-cultural analysis, student perceptions

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Introduction

The question “What makes a teacher a good teacher?” is deceptively simple yet central to educational research. A substantial body of evidence demonstrates that teacher quality is one of the most influential school-based factors shaping students’ learning trajectories. Effective teachers contribute not only to students’ immediate engagement, achievement, and classroom experiences, but also to long-term outcomes such as educational attainment and labour-market success (Chetty et al., 2014; Kane & Staiger, 2012; Rivkin et al., 2005). These are all good reasons that justify the need to investigate what makes a good teacher so that teacher preparation programs can develop more effective practitioners.

Despite this recognised importance, what constitutes “good teaching” remains contested and highly subjective, varying significantly depending on who is judging. Given the students' position as primary stakeholders and direct recipients of pedagogical practices, their perspectives on teaching quality warrant scholarly attention. For effective teaching and learning to take place, academic literature offers insights into why students' perspectives on what makes a good teacher are most critical. Vermunt and Verloop (1999) have explored extensively and also highlighted the importance of congruence as opposed to friction between learning and teaching, with the former leading to effective learning. Considering how subjective the research focus of this study is, it is, thus, crucial that there is congruence in the perception of what makes a good teacher in every classroom.

On the same note, the empirical findings in Lindberg et al. (2013) demonstrate that perceived teacher-student congruence has positive effects on student satisfaction, where the alignment of students' preferences and teacher behaviour essentially contributes to the much sought-after joy of learning and interest in the subject. Smit et al. (2014) also found that students tend to thrive in more student-centred classrooms, feeling more autonomous, capable, motivated and less absent, which again highlights the importance of teachers aligning their perceptions of education to that of students. Notably, recent empirical evidence has suggested that alignment in the perceptions of teachers and students plays a crucial role in promoting effective learning, where the congruent perceptions of education lead to optimal learning (Könings et al., 2014). This underscores the importance of this research: it is paramount for educators understand the students' perspective of what makes a good teacher so as to align teacher behavior to become a good teacher in the eyes of their students to optimise learning outcomes.

However, it is also important to note that in the oft-cited papers by Hofstede (1986, 2001) it is shown that different cultures of different countries would have an effect on teaching and learning and, in turn, this would mean that cultures would differently impact students' perception on what makes a good teacher. Cultures vary across several key dimensions identified by Hofstede (1986, 2001): power distance (acceptance of hierarchy), individualism-collectivism (societal integration), uncertainty avoidance (tolerance for ambiguity), masculinity-femininity (achievement versus cooperation), and long-term orientation (temporal focus on future versus present). Different scores on these dimensions have profound implications on the teacher and student interactions and relationships.

Understanding cultural influences on educational perceptions is further justified by Biesta's (2009) framework which highlighted that one of the three main purposes of education is socialisation. With different cultures, the way of socialisation would differ, underscoring the importance of investigating how cultural differences affects varying education systems so that

students' varying perceptions of what makes a good teacher can be justified in context and better understood.

This study investigates the perceptions of what a good teacher is among Singaporean and Finnish students. Also, we are analysing cultural similarities and differences between two of the world's most renowned educational systems, which have consistently produced top-tier student outcomes despite their distinct educational systems. Our research question is: What are students' perceptions of good teaching in Singapore and Finland?

This paper aims to use Finland and Singapore as the two countries for comparisons simply because both countries are renowned for their top-tier education systems and yet, have vastly different approaches to education, and each system is inherently rooted in different cultures with different educational philosophies, contexts and societal values (Al-Thani, 2024). Singapore scored the highest PISA (Program for International Student Assessment) in 2022, ranking 1st in mathematics, science, and reading, while Finland ranked 5th, 3rd, and 4th, respectively, among OECD countries (OECD, 2023).

Singapore's education system follows a meritocratic approach and as such, there is great emphasis on academic rigor and achievement (Chong, 2014). With meritocracy as one of the key principles of governance, students' efforts and abilities, regardless of their socio-economic backgrounds are measured mainly by their grades in national examinations, which would go on to affect and determine their future career prospects and social mobility (Deng & Gopinathan, 2016). Singapore's Ministry of Education has also made it clear that their students' are to be equipped with 21st Century competencies to help students succeed in the unpredictable and everchanging world of the future (Ministry of Education, Singapore, n.d.).

The Finnish education system, on the other hand, is largely flexible, giving the teachers the trust and freedom to adjust their curriculum and pedagogical styles based on the needs of their students without standardised tests and instead emphasises on a work-life balance for both teachers and students with shorter school days and longer holidays (Al-Thani, 2024; Sahlberg, 2015). The Finnish system prioritizes equity, student well-being, and intrinsic motivation, reflecting broader societal values of egalitarianism and trust (Sahlberg, 2015). The Finnish comprehensive school system, which educates all students together until age 16 without academic tracking or streaming, institutionally embodies egalitarian values (Sahlberg, 2015). This structural feature contrasts sharply with Singapore's early streaming based on PSLE scores, creating fundamentally different educational experiences that may shape student expectations of teacher-student relationships.

Literature Review

Research reveals preferred teacher traits that transcend age and context. Tang (2025) analysed more than 75 papers investigating what constitutes a good teacher across educational levels and identified common characteristics including desirable personality, interpersonal skills, and clear instructional methods. Kutnick and Jules (1993) similarly found that across age groups, students value teachers' caring disposition, clear teaching style, and trustworthiness. Similarly in Estonia, friendly and caring are the top two personality traits students perceived in a good teacher and also in terms of pedagogical competence, they feel that teachers should be engaging and interactive while being able to be clear in their teaching as well (Läänemets et al., 2012). Overall, there are clear overlaps in students' perceptions across the board that point to a clear ideal on what students' think a good teacher should be like - to be caring and clear.

While these characteristics remain important, secondary school students place particular emphasis on relational and interpersonal dimensions of teaching. Beishuizen et al. (2001) found that secondary school students emphasised personality and interpersonal qualities. This relational emphasis amongst secondary students appears across cultural contexts. Studies in Rwanda revealed students viewing teacher-student relationships as highly important, along with holistic learning that involves inculcating positive values and teaching both cognitively and affectively (Carter et al., 2023). Similarly, Kurdish high school students identified four key determiners of effective teaching: technical and pedagogical knowledge, interpersonal skills, and good personality (Alzeebaree & Zebari, 2021). Secondary school students in Trinidad and Tobago valued teachers who are properly trained, motivated, aware of and responsive to student needs, and dedicated to engaging and equipping them for the future (Kutnick & Jules, 1993), emphasising teacher attentiveness and responsiveness as key dimensions of the teacher-student relationship. A study in Hong Kong further indicated that students highly value friendly and caring relationships with teachers, favouring enthusiastic and humorous educators. Interestingly, contrary to traditional Chinese cultural expectations of teachers as moral exemplars, these students placed little emphasis on viewing teachers as role models (Chan, 2018). Similarly in Estonia, the aforementioned study also did mention calm, positive and humourous as amongst the top 5 characteristics (Läänemets et al., 2012). Across cultures, despite variations in specific valued traits, a clear consensus emerges: secondary school students place significant emphasis on relational qualities and value positive relationships with teachers.

Nevertheless, upon further examination, there exists differences between the particular relational traits between different cultures. The concept of “cultures of learning” (Cortazzi & Jin, 1996; Jin & Cortazzi, 2006) draws attention to how cultural communities hold different expectations, interpretations, values, and beliefs about teaching and learning. Applying the aforementioned Hofstede's (1986) cultural dimensions framework to education, the way power distance (acceptance of hierarchy), individualism-collectivism (societal integration), uncertainty avoidance (tolerance for ambiguity), masculinity-femininity (achievement versus cooperation) and long or short term orientation (choice of focus for people's efforts) can be seen to fundamentally shape teacher-student dynamics and educational expectations. In high power distance cultures, students typically expect teachers to serve as authority figures who initiate all communication and possess definitive knowledge, whereas in low power distance cultures, students expect more egalitarian relationships where questioning teachers and collaborative dialogue are encouraged (Hofstede, 1986). Similarly, collectivist cultures may emphasise teachers who maintain group harmony and show preferential treatment based on relationships, whilst individualist cultures prioritise equal treatment and individual achievement (Hofstede, 2001).

However, systematic comparative research examining how students in contrasting cultural contexts perceive effective teaching remains limited. Most existing research either examines single cultural contexts, as reviewed above, or focuses on teachers' practices and institutional characteristics rather than students' own conceptions of teaching quality. Moreover, multi-cultural comparisons that analyse differences in perceptions and discuss how culture affects such expectations are scarce. This gap is significant given that Vermunt and Verloop (1999) demonstrated that congruence between teaching approaches and student expectations promotes effective learning, whilst friction between them can be destructive.

Research explicitly linking cultural variations in teaching conceptions to Hofstede's dimensions remains limited. Gudmundsdottir and Saabar (1991) describe how conceptions differ across

cultures: Chinese teachers as virtuosos treating all equally; American teachers as improvisers individualizing instruction; Norwegian teachers as egalitarian caregivers. Inan (2014) identifies Western-Eastern European differences in student perceptions, revealing culturally patterned preferences. However, these studies remain descriptive without examining how cultural dimensions shape perceptions.

Hence, considering Könings et al.'s (2014) findings that alignment between student and teacher perceptions is essential for promoting learning outcomes, the present research is essential for teacher professional development and policy implications, helping educators understand the importance of culture in shaping beliefs about what defines a good teacher. This study addresses this gap by comparing Singaporean and Finnish secondary students' perceptions of effective teaching and examining the degree of alignment with teachers' conceptions within each cultural context.

Singapore and Finland provide a compelling comparative case for examining these questions. Singapore's education system, characterised by high performance orientation and meritocratic values (Deng & Gopinathan, 2016), operates within a high power distance, collectivist cultural context. Skovholt and D'Rozario (2000) found that Singaporean student-teachers most valued caring, understanding, humor, and approachability—relational traits that may be more important than pedagogical competence in shaping perceptions of teacher quality.

Finland represents a contrasting paradigm: low power distance, high individualism, and egalitarian values (Sahlberg, 2015). Finnish education emphasizes teacher autonomy, trust, student-centred learning, and minimal testing. Direct research on Finnish students' perceptions of effective teaching is notably absent, creating a gap given the stark cultural contrasts with Singapore.

Good teaching in Finland is widely understood as a combination of strong pedagogical expertise, reflective professionalism, and a research-informed approach to classroom practice. Finnish teachers are expected to exercise considerable autonomy and to make informed decisions that support students' learning and wellbeing. This professional culture is reinforced by academically rigorous teacher education and a societal trust in teachers' competence. Research on Finnish teacher education also highlights the importance of teacher–student relationships and the ability to create supportive, learner-centred environments that promote both academic and socio-emotional development (Leite, 2018; Niemi & Lavonen, 2020).

From the perspective of a teacher–student interaction, studies show that effective teachers are those who build positive, respectful, and responsive relationships with their pupils (Leite, 2018; Mäkipää, 2021). Finnish teachers actively learn to improve their interactions with students, emphasising listening, emotional attunement, and the creation of a safe classroom climate.

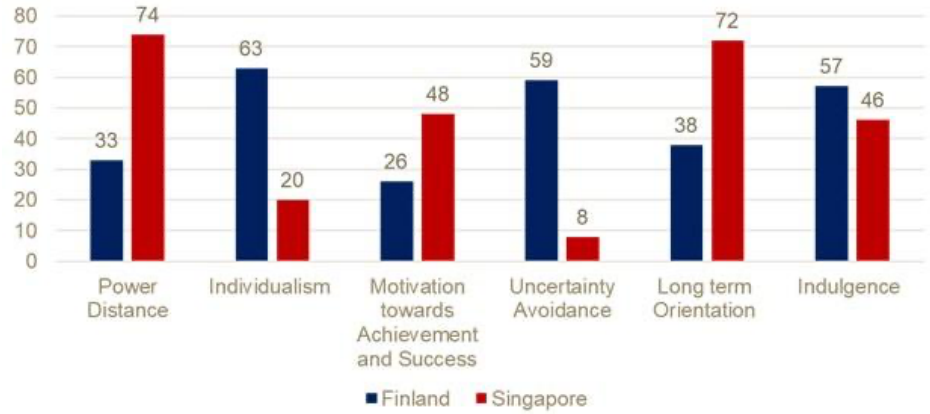
Mäkipää's study (2021) on upper-secondary students' experiences of assessment and feedback reveals that students value teachers who provide clear, fair, and constructive feedback, and who communicate expectations transparently. Students also emphasise the importance of teachers being approachable, supportive, and consistent in their interactions. Good teaching in Finland is not only defined by pedagogical skill and professional autonomy but also by the quality of everyday interactions that shape students' learning experiences.

Using Hofstede's Cultural dimensions as the theoretical framework for this paper, it is essential then to look specifically into the dimensions for each country. Figure 1 shows substantial

cultural differences between Singapore and Finland (Hofstede et al., 2010). Singapore scores higher on Power Distance (74 vs. 33), suggesting acceptance of hierarchical teacher-student relationships, while Finland prefers egalitarian dynamics. Singapore's higher Long-Term Orientation (72 vs. 38) emphasizes future rewards and deferred gratification versus Finland's present focus. Singapore's lower Individualism (20 vs. 63) reflects collectivist socialization prioritizing group harmony versus Finland's individualist autonomy. Singapore's higher achievement motivation (48 vs. 26) contrasts with Finland's cooperation values. These profiles frame how students perceive a good teacher.

Figure 1

Hofstede's Cultural Dimension Scores for Singapore and Finland (Hofstede et al., 2010)



Methodology

This study employed a comparative qualitative research design to investigate secondary school students' perceptions of what constitutes a good teacher in Singapore and Finland. The data consist of written responses from 40 secondary school students (aged 16) in Singapore and 40 secondary school students (aged 16) in Finland. Students were asked to describe what they associate with a "good teacher." The Singaporean data were collected in English, while the Finnish data were collected in Finnish and later translated by the second author into English for analysis. Participation was voluntary, and no identifying information was collected. Parents were informed about the research beforehand.

Data were gathered through classroom-based written prompts administered by teachers. This method was chosen to allow students to express their perceptions freely and anonymously, without the influence of interviewer presence or peer dynamics. The written format also ensured comparability across the two contexts.

The analysis followed Braun and Clarke's (2006) model, in which the process begins with familiarisation with the data, continues with systematic coding, and proceeds to the identification and refinement of broader themes. We began with a careful reading of all responses. Each response was then coded for the reasons students mentioned (e.g., maintains discipline, is cheerful, is friendly). After this initial coding, broader "umbrella themes" were identified under which several of the preliminary codes could be grouped.

Ethical principles guided all stages of the research. Participation was voluntary, and students were informed that their responses would be used anonymously for research purposes. No personal data were collected, and all responses were stored securely. The study adhered to

institutional ethical guidelines and respected the cultural and educational contexts in which the data were collected.

Findings

Tables 1 and 2 present the frequency of teacher characteristics identified by Finnish and Singaporean students respectively, organized into three categories: Relational & Interpersonal Qualities, Teaching Competencies, and Passion & Motivation.

As the instructions for the essay asked students to write about three traits that make teachers good teachers, the main idea of each body paragraph was extracted and the frequency for each trait was tabulated. Student responses varied considerably in their specific wording and level of detail, necessitating the grouping of semantically similar traits under broader umbrella terms.

Relational & Interpersonal Qualities encompassed codes related to how teachers interact with and treat students while teaching competencies captured codes related to pedagogical skills and subject knowledge. Similarly, Passion & Motivation included codes describing teachers' enthusiasm and commitment.

Finnish Students' Perceptions

Table 1 shows Finnish students most frequently valued compassion, kindness, and friendliness (n = 34), followed by listening to students' opinions (n = 12) and treating all equally (n = 11).

Table 1
Frequency of Teacher Traits Identified by Finnish Students

Umbrella terms	Traits	Frequency (n)
Relational and Interpersonal Skills	Compassionate, kind, cheerful, nice and friendly	34
Relational and Interpersonal Skills	Listens to students' opinions, cares about their ideas and thoughts	12
Relational and Interpersonal Skills	Treats all equally, does not have favourite students	11
Relational and Interpersonal Skills	Is not too strict, does not punish too easily	9
Relational and Interpersonal Skills	Does not give too much homework	9
Teaching competency	Communicates effectively, simplifies concepts, makes everyone understand	8
Relational and Interpersonal Skills	Patience	7
Relational and Interpersonal Skills	Empathy, EQ, understands and relates well	6

Teaching competency	Responsible, knows content well, knowledgeable, expertise, qualified, wise	6
Teaching competency	Uses various teaching techniques	6
Passion and Motivation	Sincerity, enthusiasm and passion	4
Relational and Interpersonal Skills	Gives breaks, gives in to students, sensitive to expectations	4
Teaching competency	Firm and strict, good classroom management skills	4
Relational and Interpersonal Skills	Does not humiliate or embarrass students	2

Singaporean Students' Perceptions

Table 2 shows Singaporean students most frequently cited passion and enthusiasm (n = 16), followed by caring (n = 12) and patience (n = 9).

Table 2
Frequency of Teacher Traits Identified by Singaporean Students

Umbrella terms	**Traits**	**Frequency (n)**
Passion and Motivation	Sincerity, enthusiasm and passion	16
Relational and Interpersonal Skills	Caring, giving moral support	12
Relational and Interpersonal Skills	Patience	9
Relational and Interpersonal Skills	Empathy, EQ, understands and relates well	8
Teaching competency	Engaging, communicates effectively	8
Teaching competency	Responsible, knows content well, knowledgeable, expertise, qualified, wise	7
Teaching competency	Communicates effectively, simplifies concepts	7
Relational and Interpersonal Skills	Compassionate, kind, cheerful, nice and friendly	6
Passion and Motivation	Love for learning, inspirational, motivates	4
Relational and Interpersonal Skills	Looks out for safety, emotional well-being, good observational skills	4
Relational and Interpersonal Skills	Extra guidance, support, caters to students, willing to help, mentor	4
Relational and Interpersonal Skills	Gives breaks, gives in to students, sensitive to expectations, listening	5

Relational and Interpersonal Skills	Mutual respect	4
Relational and Interpersonal Skills	Fair	4
Teaching competency	Firm and strict, good classroom management skills	4
Relational and Interpersonal Skills	Good role model	3
Teaching competency	Efficient - saves time	3
Teaching competency	Beyond textbook, current affairs	3
Teaching competency	Adapts to changing times	2
Passion and Motivation	Dedicated	1
Relational and Interpersonal Skills	Humility	1
Teaching competency	Instils creativity	1

Tables 3 and 4 provide representative quotes for each umbrella category (2-3 quotes per most frequently cited trait). Examples show how semantically similar responses were grouped despite diverse expression.

Table 3

Quotes From Students' Essays (Finland)

Umbrella Terms	Trait	Quotes from Essays
Relational and Interpersonal Skills	Compassionate, kind, cheerful, nice and friendly (n = 34)	*"Is nice for the pupils in the lessons, and helps when someone needs help."* *"A good teacher is kind, calm, and takes care of the pupils."*
Teaching Competency	Communicates effectively, simplifies concepts, makes everyone understand (n = 8)	*"A good teacher is one who understands the pupil's problems and challenges. They teach carefully and in a way that EVERYONE understands."* *"She goes through the topic many times and explains things in several different ways so that everyone will learn it."*
Passion and motivation	Sincerity, enthusiasm and passion (n = 4)	*"Knows how to have fun with the students"* *"Is enthusiastic and inspiring,"* *"clearly enjoys their work and being with the students."*

Table 4
Quotes From Students' Essays (Singapore)

Umbrella Terms	Trait	Quotes from Essays
Relational and Interpersonal Skills	Caring and giving moral support (n = 12)	*"...rather treat them with a motherly/fatherly attitude, loving and caring for them, just as a parent would"* *"A caring teacher builds trust with their students and ensures that everyone has someone to turn to whenever they feel hopeless."* *"A student can only learn well when they feel emotionally supported."*
Teaching Competency	Engaging and Communicates Effectively (n = 12)	*"A good teacher breaks down complex ideas into simple parts or even utilise fun and engaging methods to capture the students' interest in order to make understanding easier."* *"The lessons will include more activities, more demonstrations which are engaging"* *"Every student has a preferred learning style, and being able to communicate ideas to all effectively can be challenging. In my opinion, a good teacher encourages and supports all their students to take advantage of their learning style…"*
Passion and Motivation	Sincerity, Enthusiasm and Passion (n = 16)	*"...having genuine passion…"* *"Passion can drive one to be better"* *"When teachers demonstrate genuine care and enthusiasm, it signals to students that learning is meaningful and worth their effort."*

After categorising them into broader umbrella terms, Figure 3 indicates how Finnish students overwhelmingly emphasise the importance of interpersonal and relational skills (78.6%), with teaching competencies taking a distant second, and with passion and motivation taking only a small fraction of the chart (3.1%).

Figure 3
Distribution of Teacher Trait Umbrella Categories Identified by Finnish Students

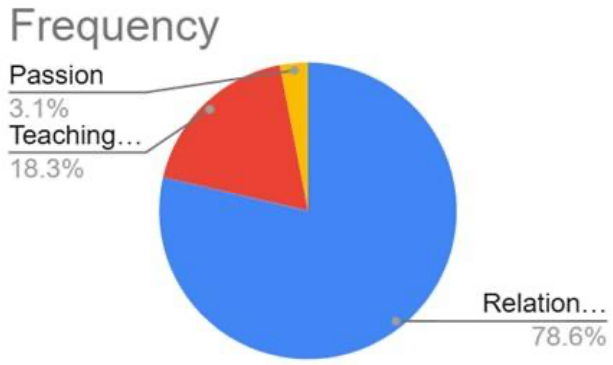


Figure 4
Distribution of Teacher Trait Umbrella Categories Identified by Singaporean Students

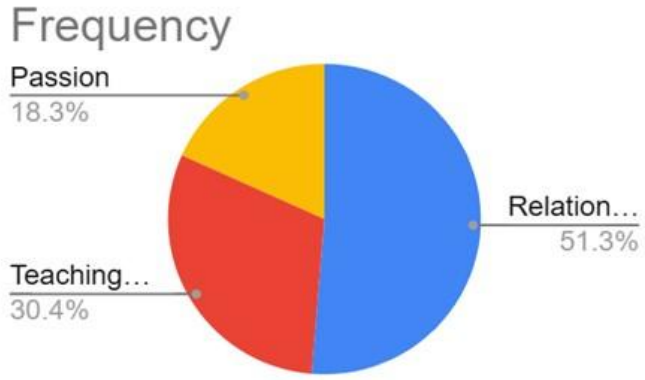


Figure 4 indicates that Singaporean students tend to focus on the relational and interpersonal skills the most (51.3%), followed by teaching competency and lastly, how passionate and motivated their teachers are (16.3%).

Three key patterns emerge from this comparison. First, while both groups prioritise relational qualities, Singaporean students also emphasise teaching competency substantially more than Finnish students (32.5% vs 18.5%). Second, Singaporean students uniquely identify passion and motivation as a defining teacher characteristic (16.3% of responses), while Finnish students rarely mention it (3.1%). Third, the specific relational and competency traits valued differ qualitatively between contexts in ways that appear culturally patterned. The following discussion examines these patterns through Hofstede's cultural dimensions framework.

Discussion

One notable similarity between the Finnish and Singaporean datasets is that the majority of characteristics identified by students in both contexts fall within the domain of interpersonal and relational qualities. These qualities not only emerged as the most frequently cited category but also constituted the largest proportion of responses in both countries (78.6% in Finland; 51.3% in Singapore). This pattern appears to be broadly consistent with existing literature, which suggests that secondary school students across diverse cultural contexts tend to place considerable importance on their interpersonal relationships with teachers (Alzeebaree &

Zebari, 2021; Artola Bonanno et al., 2024; Beishuizen et al., 2001; Carter et al., 2023; Chan, 2018).

Beyond the broad category-level similarity, specific traits also converged across contexts. Both groups valued patience (Finland n = 7; Singapore n = 9), empathy and understanding (Finland n = 6; Singapore n = 8), and effective communication (Finland n = 8; Singapore n = 8). These convergences suggest that certain teacher qualities, particularly those related to emotional attunement and pedagogical clarity, transcend cultural boundaries. This pattern aligns with Tang's (2025) meta-analysis, identifying caring disposition and clear teaching as universally valued characteristics across educational levels and contexts.

This cross-cultural convergence on relational qualities establishes what might be considered a pan-cultural baseline for effective teaching: students across contexts fundamentally value teachers who demonstrate care, patience, and clear communication. However, the relative emphasis on these qualities (78.6% vs 51.3%) and their specific manifestations differ substantially between contexts. While Finnish and Singaporean students share a foundational preference for caring teachers, the following analysis reveals that cultural values shape how caring is defined, demonstrated, and prioritised relative to other teacher characteristics.

Differences

Nature of Relational Qualities (Hierarchical vs Egalitarian Care)

Although both groups prioritised relational qualities, the nature of valued relationships differed in culturally patterned ways. Finnish students emphasised traits reflecting egalitarian, low-stress classroom environments, which aligns with Hofstede's (1986) prediction that low power distance cultures (Finland, PDI = 33) favour approachable, facilitative teachers who encourage student voice and dialogue. In such contexts, teachers may be perceived as facilitating dialogue for students to express their thoughts and ideas, rather than adopting a predominantly authoritative role in which emphasis is placed primarily on the teacher's voice over that of the students. The findings of this study support previous research from Artola Bonanno et al. (2024) that has shown that while cross-cultural research confirms that positive teacher qualities (caring, compassionate, patient) are universally valued across educational contexts, such universal constructs manifest differently across cultures, suggesting the need to examine how caring is defined rather than simply noting its presence. Finnish students' emphasis on teachers listening to their opinions and not having favorites may reflect the European pattern identified by Artola Bonanno et al. (2024), where teacher-student relationship measures uniquely assess whether teachers “see students as individuals” is similar to the students' perception on how a good teacher would be listening to students' opinions, caring about their ideas and thoughts (n = 12) and treats all equally (n = 11). This is also in line with Välimaa (2021) which details how strong egalitarian attitudes that place much weight on equality and equity are core to the Finnish culture.

Moreover, these preferences can also be understood through the broader egalitarian ethos that characterizes Finnish society, which places a strong normative emphasis on minimizing hierarchical differences, promoting mutual respect, and ensuring that all individuals are treated with equal dignity. In educational settings, teachers would interact with students as relatively equal partners in communication, avoid overt displays of authority, and distribute attention and support fairly. In Finnish classrooms, this low power distance manifests in practices such as students addressing teachers by first names and collaborative decision-making about classroom

rules. Such norms explain why Finnish students in this study valued teachers who listen, avoid favoritism, and maintain a relaxed, non-hierarchical classroom climate (Välimaa, 2021).

Singaporean students, conversely, conceptualised teachers as authoritative figures who provide care and guidance, with teachers valued as role models (n = 3), which is a trait absent from Finnish responses. This reflects high power distance expectations (Singapore, PDI = 74) where care and authority coexist: teachers occupy positions of higher standing precisely because they are central pillars of support and bear responsibility for students' well-being and academic progress and provide care, guidance, and emotional or academic support when needed, aligning with paternalistic leadership styles in high PDI cultures (Hofstede, 1986; Polatcan et al., 2025; Qian & Walker, 2021). Notably, few Singaporean students mentioned teachers listening to them (n = 5), suggesting student voice is less emphasized than in Finland.

All in all, this pattern from the collected data indicates that while both groups value caring teachers, Finnish students seek reciprocal, horizontal relationships whilst Singaporean students expect hierarchical care emanating from authority. This suggests variation in how students in the two contexts perceive the relational role of teachers within the classroom despite both placing much importance on relational and interpersonal qualities in teachers they deem good.

Teaching Competency Emphasis (Future-Oriented vs Present-Focused)

There appears to be a stronger emphasis on teaching competency among Singaporean students compared to their Finnish counterparts. This finding seems to align with broader understandings of the educational cultures of the two systems. Given the prominence of meritocracy within the Singaporean education system, it may be unsurprising that students place value on teachers' instructional effectiveness, pedagogical variety, classroom management, subject knowledge, and clarity of explanation (Chong, 2014). From the Finnish perspective, the relatively diminished emphasis on teaching competency may reflect the high degree of institutional trust characteristic of the Finnish education system, as documented in previous research (Al-Thani, 2024; Sahlberg, 2015; Välimaa, 2021). Within this context, teacher competence appears to be regarded as a foundational expectation rather than a differentiating factor that distinguishes exemplary educators from their peers.

Beyond the quantitative difference in emphasis on teaching competencies (Singapore 32.5% vs Finland 18.5%), the specific types of competencies valued differed qualitatively. Singaporean students uniquely emphasized future-oriented, adaptive competencies: going beyond textbooks to cover current affairs (n = 3), adapting to changing times (n = 2), instilling creativity (n = 1), and being efficient (n = 3). These traits, absent from Finnish responses, align with Singapore's high Long-Term Orientation (LTO = 72), which emphasises “deferred gratification of needs accepted” and “perseverance, sustained efforts toward results” (Hofstede, 2001, p. 367). This cultural orientation manifests in explicit educational policy: Singapore's Ministry of Education emphasizes equipping students with 21st-century competencies to navigate an “unpredictable and everchanging world of the future” (Ministry of Education, Singapore, n.d.; Tan et al., 2017). Teacher education is deliberately designed to prepare educators who can develop future-ready learners (Liu, 2024, p. 34). Students appear to internalize these culturally-embedded policy priorities, valuing teachers who demonstrate the forward-thinking adaptability their culture and education system explicitly promote.

Finnish students emphasized present mastery and established pedagogical competencies – communicating effectively (n = 8), using various teaching techniques (n = 6), and possessing

subject knowledge (n = 6) - without mentioning innovation or future-orientation. This pattern aligns with Finland's moderately lower Long-Term Orientation (LTO = 38), where “immediate gratification of needs expected” and “quick results expected” characterize cultural norms (Hofstede, 2001, p. 367). Students' preferences for reduced homework (n = 9), relaxed discipline (n = 9), and breaks (n = 4) further reflect this present-focused orientation, where current comfort and clarity take precedence over intensive future preparation. This cultural orientation aligns with Finland's education policy, which explicitly prioritizes student well-being and work-life balance (Sahlberg, 2015), creating reinforcement between cultural values and institutional practices.

Passion and Motivation

The most striking difference between the two countries' datasets is the difference in emphasis placed on passion and motivation. Singaporean students identified passion and enthusiasm as the single most important characteristic differentiating good from average teachers (n = 16, representing 16.3% of all mentions), with students explicitly linking teacher passion to heightened engagement, interest, and effort in making lessons engaging. Finnish students, by contrast, rarely mentioned passion (n = 4, 3.1% of mentions), suggesting it is relatively unimportant in their conceptions of good teacherhood. Student responses indicated that Singaporean students perceived passionate teachers as more likely to invest effort in making lessons engaging and interesting, suggesting that passion may be valued not only as an affective quality but also as one that indirectly enhances instructional effectiveness.

This pattern aligns with research demonstrating that motivational sources differ systematically between collectivist and individualist cultures. In collectivist societies like Singapore (IDV = 20), extrinsic motivational drivers, such as support from students' microsystems within the Bronfenbrenner's ecosystem, are stronger predictors of achievement than in individualist societies, where intrinsic motivation and one's passion predominate as motivational factors (Bronfenbrenner, 2000; Li et al., 2021). Furthermore, Iyengar and Lepper (1999) demonstrated that individualist children are more intrinsically motivated by personal choice, whereas collectivist children are more motivated by in-group sources of inspiration. Looking specifically to cultures similar to Singapore, empirical research in collectivist Asian contexts supports this interpretation. In China, teachers' enthusiasm and passion are crucial in predicting students' sense of belonging in school, which in turn is a factor that highly affects their academic achievements (Anderman, 2003; Chen et al., 2024; Xue, 2024). This suggests that in collectivist Confucian Heritage Culture societies like Singapore, teacher passion functions as a collective motivational force that strengthens teacher-student bonds whilst inspiring group-oriented achievement.

Conversely, Finnish students' minimal emphasis on passion (n = 4) and overwhelming preference for teachers who are kind, cheerful, and friendly (n = 34) reflects both individualist reliance on intrinsic motivation (IDV = 63) and feminine cultural values (MAS = 26) that prioritize modesty, calm support, and egalitarianism (Hofstede, 2001). It is nevertheless noteworthy that studies conducted among Finnish teachers indicate that the primary reason for entering the teaching profession in Finland is precisely a sense of passion and an intrinsic calling for the work (Virtanen et al., 2025).

Limitations and Future Research

This study has a few limitations. First, data were collected from only one school per country (40 students from each), limiting generalizability. While Finnish schools are generally characterized as largely homogeneous due to comprehensive schooling policies that avoid early tracking (Sahlberg, 2015), Singaporean secondary schools differ in academic level as students are enrolled based on their scores on the national standardized test, the PSLE (Primary School Leaving Examination). The socio-economic backgrounds of students may also differ between schools. Although family background affects academic performance in both countries, the achievement gap between disadvantaged and privileged students is wider in Singapore than in Finland (Lim, 2018; OECD, 2018). These factors could influence school culture and students' perceptions of teaching and learning.

Second, this study interprets patterns through Hofstede's cultural dimensions framework, which characterizes national averages and may not apply uniformly to all individuals within a culture. Cultural dimensions provide useful interpretive lenses but cannot fully capture individual variation or rapidly evolving cultural values, particularly among younger generations. In Finland, for example, the cultural backgrounds represented among students are becoming increasingly diverse each year (Keski-Mäenpää et al., 2025), and this development is accompanied by a broadening of conceptions of what constitutes good teaching.

Future research should collect data from a variety of schools across different academic levels and socio-economic contexts. Future research should also test whether the patterns identified here generalise across broader samples of different cultures and employ qualitative interviews to explore how students themselves interpret and reason about the teacher qualities they value.

Conclusion

This paper clearly demonstrates that while there are baseline similarities across cultures, there are inherent differences in students' perceptions of what makes a good teacher, and much of these differences can be explained by cultural variation. Finnish students (PDI = 33, LTO = 38) emphasise egalitarian relationships, present comfort, and being heard, while Singaporean students (PDI = 74, LTO = 72) value passionate teachers who provide hierarchical care and future-oriented instruction. Hofstede's cultural dimensions framework (Hofstede et al., 2010) is a useful theoretical lens for comprehending these nuanced differences. This study extends the application of Hofstede's framework to student perceptions of teaching quality, demonstrating that Power Distance Index and Long-Term Orientation meaningfully predict what students value in teachers across different cultural contexts.

The implications of these results also point to the importance of aligning students' expectations with teacher practice. In Finland, where it is most important for students to feel heard, it is essential that national and school-level policies are structured to enable greater democracy in classrooms and schools, allowing students to have wider ownership and control of their own learning. In Singapore, where passion in teachers is most important to students, it is vital that national and school-wide policies are designed to prevent teacher burnout and the extinguishing of passion in teachers, but instead provide them space to cultivate and sustain their passion.

Declaration of Generative AI and AI-Assisted Technologies in the Writing Process

The author declares that Claude, AI-assisted writing software, was used in proofreading and refining the language used in the manuscript. The usage was limited to correcting grammatical and spelling errors and rephrasing statements for accuracy and clarity. The author further declares that, apart from Claude, no other AI or AI-assisted technologies have been used to generate content in writing the manuscript. The ideas, design, procedures, findings, analyses, and discussion are originally written and derived from careful and systematic conduct of the research.

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