

Research Article

Political Context and Faculty Attitudes Towards High Maintenance Students in Kurdistan, Iraq

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Abstract

This research explores the resilience and stress levels of university students in Kurdistan, Iraq. Focusing on the educational impact within this context, the study examines the relationship between student stress and faculty engagement. Employing both Pearson correlation analysis and two-way ANOVA, the investigation provides insights into how faculty availability correlates with student stress in a politically tense environment. Key findings indicate concerns for what is known as the Pygmalion effect and underscore the need for support services that address the unique socio-political challenges. Thus, an impetus for an examination of student engagement practices, emphasizing the importance of faculty interaction in crisis-affected zones. The exegesis underscores the role of institutional support, urging educational authorities to enhance faculty management tailored to the multicultural and politically sensitive context of international education. From which, it advocates for empathy and a broader understanding of how postcolonial and post-dictatorial dynamics affect higher education. Conclusively, this article calls for ongoing research into the dynamic between political tension, student well-being, and academic success, suggesting that addressing these interconnected facets is essential for fostering an effective learning environment. It posits that understanding and improving the faculty-student engagement within can significantly enhance academic outcomes.

Keywords

International Education, Culture, Politics, Colonialism, Pygmalion Effect, Student Engagement, Kurdistan, Iraq

1. Introduction

From 2013-2016, I taught at a university in Kurdistan, Iraq at the time that ISIS invaded Kirkuk and wrecked terror in the region. One of the major complaints from the faculty concerned that the students were too "high maintenance." It is still difficult for me to imagine what it would be like to live the life a Kurdish university student in the wake of the Iraq War. The students faced numerous challenges and stressors in their daily lives, including personal safety concerns, economic

instability, and political uncertainty. As a faculty member working within that context, it was important for me to approach students with compassion and understanding, recognizing the difficult circumstances they were facing. Ensuring that students had a supportive atmosphere proved indispensable. In addition, it is important to encourage open and respectful dialogue about the complex political and cultural issues, while also recognizing the potential for trauma trig-

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gering among students. Teachers need to be adaptive and accommodating in learning environments like the one I experienced in Kurdistan, Iraq. Overall, it required a commitment to social justice and a willingness to engage difficult topics and challenging situations with empathy and care. As frustrated and weary as anyone else, I saw no benefit in complaining about them being high maintenance.

As a leader, faculty member, and administrator, I did find value in collecting data to understand the problem with the belief that there were other factors at play. The faculty would have benefited from recognizing it wasn't necessarily that students were privileged or spoiled, helpless academically or incompetent. Having rediscovered the data during recent professional development, it is nearly ten years old now. While it may not reflect present trends or circumstances in Kurdistan, I believe it presents a valuable perspective and confidently include an analysis of that data in this article to further research interests in the area. While diligent efforts have been made to ensure accuracy and reliability, the results should still be interpreted conservatively since they might not directly apply to present circumstances or settings.

I have preserved using the term "high maintenance" as it had emerged to describe students needing more attention and support than what one might typically expect, despite it being pejorative in this context and to make that point known and explicit to readers. Although the resource no longer includes the definition, the International Encyclopedia of the Social and Behavioral Sciences once described it specifically as a "derogatory label for a person who is demanding or difficult to deal with" [27]. Being high maintenance encompasses a broad range of behaviors that include excessive neediness, attention-seeking, or a tendency to be easily upset or offended. One area relevant to understanding student needs as they relate to such behaviors involves student engagement and services. While no research on high maintenance students exists, a growing body of research addresses engagement and support. Research approaches these matters as a main factor for success at all levels of teaching and learning.

This research thus examines the significance of Teacher Prep Time, Availability of Instructor Outside Class, and Student Stress due to the Political Environment, using correlation coefficients and a two-way ANOVA. Findings demonstrate the impact of these variables on engagement. From which, the study approaches the dangers of what is known as the Pygmalion effect and contextualizes its consequences for underrepresented, minority, and diverse student populations. The research puts emphasis on these concerns for contentious social and political environments, notably post-colonial and post-dictatorial contexts. Empathy and compassion prove essential to overcoming challenges. Underscoring the implications for faculty resources management and student services at institutional levels, recognizing and understanding the historical and political context in which they operate proves indispensable to avoiding biased perceptions of students. For example, perceiving them as high maintenance.

nance.

2. Kurdish Education in Iraq

Kurdistan is a semi-autonomous region in northern Iraq, and its educational system has undergone significant changes over the past decades. Primary education in Kurdistan is mandatory and free for all children between the ages of six and twelve – composed of six years of schooling, during which students learn subjects such as Arabic, Kurdish, mathematics, science, and social studies. Kurdistan divides secondary education into two stages: intermediate and high school. Intermediate school covers grades 7-9 while high school covers grades 10-12. Secondary students choose either a general academic track or a vocational track. Several universities and colleges both public and private provide postsecondary education. The University of Kurdistan Hewlêr (UKH), founded in 2006, is one of the leading universities in the region and offers programs in fields such as engineering, business, and humanities. Others include Salahaddin University, University of Duhok, and Soran University.

Religious institutions such as mosques and madrasas provided education before the establishment of modern universities. In the early 20th century, the Ottoman Empire founded a few secular schools in Kurdistan, but they were largely derisory and provided limited access for Kurdish students [16, 26, 31]. With the establishment of the Republic of Iraq in 1958, efforts were made to modernize education in Kurdistan as the central government viewed it as a means to an end for Arabization. In the 1970s and 1980s, Ba'athist factions launched a campaign of Arabization and repression against the Kurdish population, which included targeting Kurdish schools and teachers. The government continued to view education as a political tool and targeted Kurdish schools to repress the Kurdish identity and culture [19]. When they came to power in Iraq, the Ba'athist government attempted to Arabize the Kurdish population by imposing Arabic as the sole language of instruction. The government also attempted to replace Kurdish teachers with Arab teachers [32]. The circumstances forced many Kurds to leave school and seek education in informal settings [7]. In some cases, students attended schools run by the Kurdish resistance movement or receives education through underground networks.

In the aftermath of the Gulf War in 1991, the region gained semi-autonomy, and the Kurdish government began to establish its own institutions. However, the aftermath of the Gulf War and Iraq War had a severe impact on the educational system. Iraqi forces destroyed many institutions of learning [20, 33]. Following the U.S. invasion of Iraq, the Kurdish government again began a campaign to rebuild and rehabilitate with support from international organizations such as UNICEF and the World Bank [14]. One of the major challenges facing education in Kurdistan was the shortage of trained teachers and inadequate facilities [28, 35]. The Kurdish government worked to recruit and train new teachers and

to build new schools and institutions.

3. Methodology

This study collected data from a sample of 98 teachers and students at a university in the semi-autonomous region of Kurdistan between 2013 and 2016, involving a period which witnessed the rise of ISIS. To gauge student stress, student affairs conducted a survey which included questions about their personal circumstances among other topics of inquiry. That survey included a Likert scale asking them to rate their level of stress, explicitly due to political conditions affecting Kurdistan. Faculty self-reported preparation time and student evaluations provided information on the availability of instructors outside class. Analysis involves correlation coefficients to measure the strength and direction of the relationships between Teacher Prep Time, Availability of Instructor Outside Class, and Student Stress due to Political Environment and the linear relationship between two variables X and Y. Then, a two-way ANOVA investigates categorical independent variables on a continuous dependent variable.

Teacher Prep Time and Availability of Instructor Outside Class serve as the independent variables, and Student Stress due to Political Environment becomes the dependent variable. The two-way ANOVA allows for an examination of both main effects (the impact of each) and interaction effects (how the variables interact to affect the dependent variable). The test of the effects for the model shows sources of variation for

Factor A (Teacher Prep Time and Availability of Instructor Outside Class), Factor B (Student Stress due to Political Environment and Availability of Instructor Outside Class), and the Interaction between Factor A and B. The results that follow provide insight into the correlations and sources of variation between the variables and shed light on the relationships between these factors to understand student engagement.

4. Results and Findings

First, the outcome of the correlation shows a negative relationship between of Teacher Prep Time and Availability of Instructor Outside Class with the level of stress reported by the students due to the political environment (Table 1). This suggests that when teachers have less time to prepare or are less available outside of class, students may experience higher levels of environmental stress. However, there is no correlation between Student Stress due to Political Environment and Teacher Prep Time. The ANOVA table shows that there are variances between groups based on Teacher Prep Time and Availability of Instructor Outside Class ($F = 15.68$, $p < 0.01$), as well as between groups based on Student Stress due to Political Environment and Availability of Instructor Outside Class ($F = 66.67$, $p < 0.01$). That is, they are each significant (we reject the null hypothesis). The ANOVA reveals that the amount of time that teachers spent preparing and being available impacted student stress levels in the context of the charged political climate of Kurdistan, Iraq.

Table 1. Correlation Matrix.

Variables	Teacher Prep Time	Availability of Instructor Outside Class	Student Stress (due to the Environment)
Teacher Prep Time	1.00 ($p < 0.01$)	-0.54 ($p < 0.05$)	-0.08 ($p > 0.05$)
Availability of Instructor Outside Class	-0.54 ($p < 0.05$)	1.00 ($p < 0.01$)	-0.60 ($p < 0.01$)
Student Stress due to Political Environment	-0.08 ($p > 0.05$)	-0.60 ($p < 0.01$)	1.00 ($p < 0.01$)

Table 2. Two-way ANOVA.

Sources of Variation	Sum of Squares (SS)	Degrees of Freedom (df)	Mean Squares (MS)	F-Statistic	p-value
Between Teacher Prep Time and Availability of Instructor Outside Class	SS = 7.20	df = 1	MS = 7.20	F = 15.68	$p < 0.01$
Between Student Stress due to Political Environment and Availability of Instructor Outside Class	SS = 30.60	df = 1	MS = 30.60	F = 66.67	$p < 0.01$
Within	SS = 23.20	df = 27	MS = 0.86		

Table 2 also reports Within-group variability not explained by the factors tested. For which the variation is 0.86, showing

that the factors do not account for some of the variability. This could indicate there are others to consider (individual student characteristics, differences in teaching styles, or other unmeasured factors). Referring back to the correlation matrix, Teacher Prep Time likewise has no statistically significant correlation with Student Stress due to Political Environment even though it shows an overall effect in the ANOVA. This occurs because controlling for the effects of the other variable in the two-way ANOVA evaluates the impacts of each independent variable. Thus, the effect of Availability of Instructor Outside Class acts as a confounding variable, indicating the need to examine the relationships more.

Despite the need for further inquiry, the results can markedly steer directions for strategies to inform broader policies and practices. They represent an application of ideas which indicate how investigating student perceptions can contribute to designing evaluation and assessment strategies which offer instructors a more diverse view of what is happening in their classrooms while enabling them to adjust and meet student needs. Regarding student engagement with specific concerns for the challenges to empowering agency [1, 11], explaining the variation depends on the questions asked. In the case of the Kurdish university and student stress, it would be relevant to explore the role of empathy as it relates to engagement and how feedback can help instructors understand student needs and create a supportive learning environment. Based on the values of inclusivity and virtues of empathy, educators need strengthen relationships through a whole-institution approach to internationalization [40]. Building on comparable insights, other research argues that educators need to be aware of the norms, values, and biases in the educational setting and how they affect engagement [41]. Faculty complaints about students being “high maintenance” indicates particular concerns for what is known as the Pygmalion effect.

5. The Pygmalion Effect

The Pygmalion effect, also known as the Rosenthal effect, refers to a phenomenon in which a person's expectations about another's skills and abilities influence that person's performance. In an educational context, this means that a teacher's perceptions can impact student performance in positive or negative ways [4, 29, 30, 38, 39]. That could lead to a self-fulfilling prophecy from mistaken assumptions and an overall lack of empathy for students and their potential. Should faculty harbor misconceptions regarding a student's capabilities and necessities, they might fail to extend the same level of support they would offer to a student whom they perceive otherwise. In the specific scenario of the Kurdish context under consideration, this situation could lead to negative impacts on student-teacher interactions and increase student stress due to the prevailing political conditions.

If a faculty member accepts that a student is “high maintenance,” they may not take the time to understand the student's unique needs or challenges. This lack of respon-

siveness can create an adverse culture that is not conducive to learning [10, 15]. Having uninformed, negative expectations about students can perpetuate bias and stereotypes [34]. That can only lead to unequal treatment and limited opportunities for individual students and those with shared group identities, noting findings which suggest that students with different ethnic and racial backgrounds engage in dissimilar ways [37]. University teachers have the potential to impact student wellbeing constructively or harmfully; approachability and demonstrated interest in how faculty perceive students prove to be principal factors [6]. Thus, faculty should approach each student without preconceived judgements.

Students from diverse backgrounds face divergent and inimitable challenges which affect their experiences [2], and this proves especially true for the multicultural contexts of international education. In postcolonial and post-dictatorial environments, the challenges can be acute as the students have more than likely experienced systemic discrimination, poverty, or social exclusion. These social groups may have limited access to education due to political factors impacting socioeconomic factors in postcolonial environments [25]. Colonial powers bluntly designed educational systems to serve colonial interests [3, 5], and students from persecuted groups face notable obstacles. The legacy of dictatorship can create inequalities that persist for generations. In the case of Iraq, not only did the authorities exclude the Kurds from education, they subjugated them to genocidal extremes.

In both postcolonial and post-dictatorial settings (or even settings with tense political or socioeconomic challenges in general) misconceptions perpetuate existing disparities. As previously iterated, faculty may assume that students are less capable or unmotivated, which results in a lack of engagement and limits their academic achievements. To address these challenges, faculty must maintain an open mind about student needs [12]. Instructors need work to create a culture that celebrates diversity, promotes inclusivity, and values the experiences of each student. All stakeholders and participants can promote a growth mindset by reframing engagement as a prerequisite to address social institutions which propagate inequality; they can incentivize reciprocal relationships by emphasizing care and professional responsibility [6, 38]. In this respect, agentic engagement offers a method that respects the students' own lived experiences and represents broader cultural realities through self-reflexive insight [11]. Each student in any circumstance deserves this respect from every stakeholder at all levels of their education.

Reflecting on the psychological dimensions discussed, it becomes clear that addressing student engagement is not merely beneficial, but essential. Research has consistently highlighted its importance, revealing that students who maintain constructive relationships with teachers and peers achieve better academic outcomes [17, 21, 22, 30, 37]. This underscores the necessity of cultivating a classroom atmosphere which prioritizes engagement and student agency by continually reassessing teaching methodologies, embracing

feedback, and tailoring approaches that meet the varied needs of a dynamic student body. Pedagogical partnerships can enhance engagement and empower students, contributing significantly to their academic success [11, 13]. Engaging, active learning strategies are instrumental in creating equitable environments [1, 17, 21, 24, 36, 37]. Notably, dialogue and ensuring clear assessment guidelines in the interests of engagement can lead to greater autonomy in learning [9]. Collectively, these insights emphasize the connection between engagement and outcomes, iterating the often-overlooked influence of instructor behaviors in enriching the university learning experience. No classroom environment can effectively engage students without first overcoming stereotypes, adverse perceptions, and negative stigmas.

6. Student Services

Another relevant area of research involves student support services. Colleges and universities have invested in programs and services to assist students with a range of needs, including academic support, mental health counseling, and disability services. Institutional support for cocurricular and extracurricular activities likewise serve to address the demands for increased engagement. “High maintenance” students would benefit from these types of services. Based on the negative correlations between Teacher Prep Time and Availability of Instructor Outside Class with Student Stress due to Political Environment, one could argue that student services prove especially important in tense contexts but also remain pertinent to settings with diverse student populations that might have directly experienced the impact of such circumstances. Institutions can only advantage opportunities to create a more positive and engaging environment through strategic deliberations. In terms of this study, that involves minimizing student stress to improve academic experiences.

The two-way ANOVA detailed in this study reveals that both Teacher Prep Time and Availability of Instructor Outside Class are principal factors influencing what students might experience in a contentious environment. The F-values and low p-values indicate that these factors are noteworthy variables for predicting student stress levels, and addressing these factors may be an effective way to reduce stress levels. One way to examine this would be to undertake a two-way ANOVA with interaction to test for the effects between Teacher Prep Time and Availability of Instructor Outside Class, indicating that the effect of one variable depends on the level of the other. This finding could steer directions that address both factors simultaneously, which may be more effective than focusing on either factor alone. Another possible step would be to conduct a multivariate regression analysis to determine the relative contribution of each factor in predicting student stress. That could identify which factors are most significant for alleviating student stress and could provide insights into institutional strategies for addressing the issue, depending on the strategic questions asked.

We cannot underestimate the implications for student services in international education. Learning contexts with student populations that have experienced severe discrimination deserve attention, and the topic merits further research which focus on these critical issues. To identify potential strategies, one potential next step for student services could be to explore the relationship between the significant factors identified in the post-hoc tests and other relevant variables. For example, by examining the relationship between Teacher Prep Time and Availability of Instructor Outside Class with student performance outcomes, or by investigating potential mediators between these factors and student stress levels.

If the endpoint of the analysis takes an interest in factors that contribute to student evaluations, factor analysis could be a useful tool for identifying the underlying dimensions or constructs that impact the data. To determine groups of similar cases or observations, cluster analysis or other methods such as principal component analysis may be more appropriate. If the goal is to examine the relationship between variables, regression analysis is a good choice. In the case of both student services and student engagement, data-driven decision-making proves indispensable for solutions and an awareness of the multicultural contexts.

7. International Education

Along with simply treating students as people, educators should have, produce, and share knowledge of the political environments in which they teach – as addressed by both social scientists and educationalists alike [8, 15, 18, 22]. Contextualizing historical circumstances allows teachers to engage the cultural context. This can support them to adapt instructional methods and materials to meet needs and expectations by avoiding misunderstandings and prejudices. Knowing the setting can also help faculty become sensitive to local issues that may impact learning experiences. For example, knowledge of political tensions in a country or region can enable faculty to make informed decisions in the classroom and scaffold content. Educators in stressful political settings may need to address systemic issues that impact access and quality. This could include advocating for policies and resources that support students as well as working to address structural inequalities which limit agency. Finally, being cognizant of the environment in which they teach can help international teaching faculty communicate more effectively, thus fostering stronger relationships and partnerships and helping them navigate cultural barriers that may arise. These issues likewise raise interest for consideration in terms of faculty management beyond the global implications.

8. Conclusion

In analyzing the factors related to student stress, the relationship between faculty preparation time and availability

outside of class demonstrated decisive in alleviating the tensions felt by students. This suggests a need to investigate the impacts of politically charged and tense environments on academic achievement. Pearson correlation and two-way ANOVA showed that the time required by students could have been negatively impacted by faculty availability, indicating the relevance for understanding teacher perceptions and the potential impact of the Pygmalion effect on student stress levels and achievement given the complaints that the students were “high maintenance.” Faculty at international institutions can benefit from cultivating their cross-cultural competence and knowledge of the political, historical, and social contexts in which they teach. As well, there are notable considerations for faculty management and student services to support communities with diverse and differentiated socioeconomic, political, and cultural experiences in general.

Abbreviations

ANOVA: Analysis of Variance

ISIS: Islamic State of Iraq and Syria

UNICEF: United Nations Children’s Emergency Fund

Author Contributions

Kenneth Burke is the sole author. The author read and approved the final manuscript.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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