# Managing Classrooms as Culturally Foreign Teachers: Effects of Classroom Composition on Teacher Quality

## Antje von Suchodoletz[a], Lydia Barza[b], & Ross A. Larsen[c]
### [a]New York University Abu Dhabi, [b]Zayed University Abu Dhabi, [c]Brigham Young University

Poster presented at the Biennial Meeting of the Society for Research in Child Development, Philadelphia, March 18-21, 2015

## THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Over the past two decades, growth-demands and policy-driven demands resulted in national teacher markets shortages internationally. To avoid negative effects on quality, the demand for high-quality teachers is often met through recruitment of foreign educated teachers (McKinnon, Moussa-Inaty, & Barza, 2014). Studies suggest that teacher-child interactions, essential to quality teaching (Hamre et al., 2013), are less positive and supportive when teachers and students do not share the same ethno-cultural background (Howes & Shivers, 2006; Saft & Pianta, 2001). In the present study, we present a first attempt to systematically investigate how globally mobile teachers respond to ethno-cultural classroom diversity in their day-to-day classroom interactions. The United Arab Emirates (UAE) is a country that strongly depends on culturally foreign teachers (McKinnon et al., 2013). We focused on Western educated teachers (many from the United Kingdom and the United States) in relation to Arab kindergarten children and kindergarten children of international foreign workers in the UAE.

## EDUCATION IN THE UNITED ARAB EMIRATES

The rapid transformation of the UAE from one of the poorest nations to one of the highest per capita income of the world has impacted the education system (McKinnon et al., 2013). An important characteristic of the current education system in the UAE is its wide diversity of educational providers and curricula. In the country's efforts to adapt and uphold international standards, the Abu Dhabi Education Council has developed a 10-year strategic plan to enhance students' academic skills and performance with one key initiative being the provision of a high quality learning environment.

## RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1. Does a mismatch between teachers' and students' ethno-cultural background result in lower quality teacher-child interaction in kindergarten classrooms?
2. How stable is the quality of teacher-child interactions in kindergarten classrooms over the course of the school day and does it differ based on classroom ethno-cultural composition?

## METHOD

**Participants:**

$N = 26$ female Western educated teachers ($M_{age} = 38$ years, $SD = 9.85$) from 7 schools in the UAE Teachers had on average 10 years of experience teaching in early childhood education settings.

Classrooms were divided into two groups based on classrooms' teacher-student ethno-cultural composition.

→ **11 classrooms with teacher-student ethno-cultural mismatch (primarily Arab students with a Western teacher)**

→ **15 classrooms with a teacher-student ethno-cultural match (international, primarily Western students with a Western teacher)**

**Observations of teacher-child interactions:**

Classroom Assessment Scoring System (CLASS Pre-K; Pianta, La Paro, & Hamre, 2008)
- four observations cycles during a regular school morning
- in total, 53-80 minutes of observation per teacher and classroom ($M = 71.92$, $SD = 5.6$)
- Cronbach's alpha were .87 for emotional support, .80 for classroom organization, and .79 for instructional support

## RESULT 1

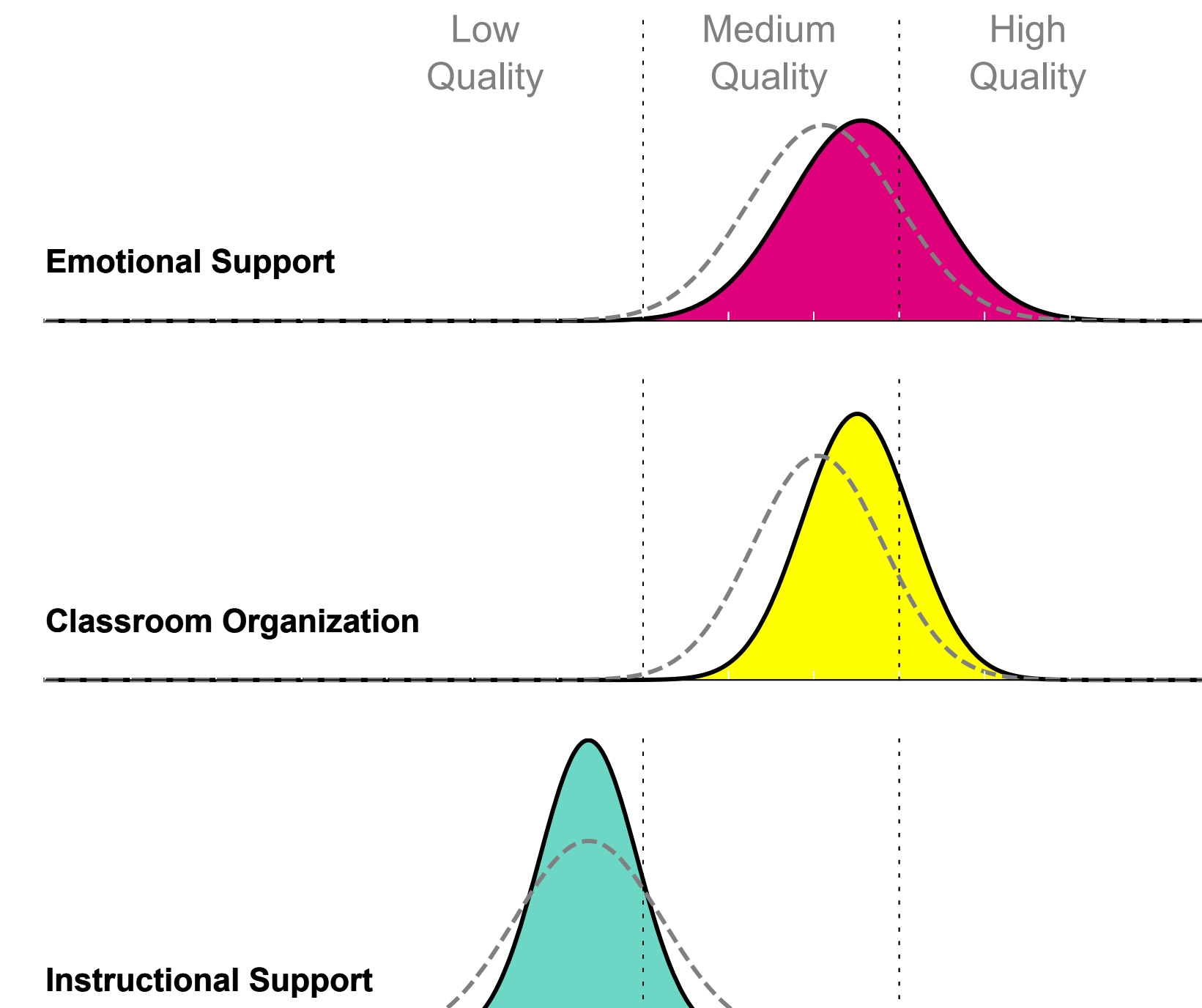**Describing the quality of classroom interactions**



Figure 1. Average ratings of interactions. Colored area: UAE data. The area under the dashed lines represents USA data for comparison (Hamre, Hatfield, Pianta, & Jamil, 2014).

Table 1. *Comparison of Teacher-Child Interactions Across Classrooms of Differing Ethno-Cultural Composition*

|  | Teacher-student ethno-cultural mismatch | | Teacher-student ethno-cultural match | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
|  | M | SD | M | SD |
| Emotional Support | 4.97 | .66 | 5.99 | .70 |
| Classroom Organization | 5.07 | .39 | 5.84 | .59 |
| Instructional Support | 2.04 | .60 | 2.59 | .43 |

Robust Means Modeling:
- significant differences in the level of emotional support (estimate = 1.023, S.E. = .398, $p = .010$) and classroom organization (estimate = .767, S.E. = .288, $p = .008$)
- no significant differences with regard to the level of instructional support (estimate = .555, S.E. = .345, $p = .108$)

## RESULT 2

**Within-morning variability as a function of ethno-cultural classroom composition**

Emotional support: similar rate of decrease across the morning in all classrooms; lower in classrooms with a teacher-student ethno-cultural mismatch (remained at a lower level throughout the morning in these classrooms)

Classroom organization: decreased in all classrooms but the slopes did not significantly differ indicating a similar rate of decrease

Instructional support: decrease only in classrooms with ethno-cultural teacher-student match; lower in classrooms with a teacher-student ethno-cultural mismatch

Table 2. *Parameters of Multilevel Growth Models (observation cycles entered as repeated measurement points for the three CLASS Pre-K domains)*

| Model | Intercept | Slope |
|---|---|---|
| **Full sample ($N = 26$)** | | |
| Emotional support | 5.738** | -0.129 |
| Classroom organization | 2.550** | -0.136 |
| Instructional support | 5.842** | -0.251** |
| **Teacher-student ethno-cultural mismatch ($n = 11$)** | | |
| Emotional support | 5.009** | -0.177 |
| Classroom organization | 2.057** | -0.045 |
| Instructional support | 5.504** | -0.342* |
| **Teacher-student ethno-cultural match ($n = 15$)** | | |
| Emotional support | 6.162** | -0.108 |
| Classroom organization | 2.864** | -0.190* |
| Instructional support | 6.126** | -0.188* |

Note. * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$.

## CONCLUSIONS

Results of the study show that teacher-student ethno-cultural mismatch pose a challenge for teachers. Levels of emotional support for Western teachers with mostly Arab students were low as compared to Western teachers with international (mostly Western) students. Therefore, teachers who interacted with students of cultures more similar to their own were better at creating a positive classroom climate and were more sensitive to students' needs. In addition, teacher-student cultural compatibility was associated with proactively and effectively reducing misbehavior. These findings support previous research in the UAE which showed lower teaching self-efficacy among foreign educated teachers, suggesting that cultural adaptation may influence efficacy (McKinnon, Moussa-Inaty, & Barza, 2014). Results imply that support for teachers to adapt and apply their teaching strategies with students who are ethno-culturally different from them is important for assuring teacher quality. A limitation of the present study, however, is that it utilized a quasi-experimental design with no random assignment of teachers to schools and classrooms. Thus, confounding variables due to school and individual student differences could also have accounted for the results.

## REFERENCES

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Contact: avs5@nyu.edu