

**A Cross-Cultural Study of High School Teachers'
Tacit Knowledge of Interpersonal Skills**

Division G – Section 1: Micro-analyses of the social contexts of teaching and learning

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Abstract

Effective teachers are characterized not only by pedagogical abilities and subject area mastery, but also by interpersonal skills. Using the *Tacit Knowledge Inventory for High School Teachers (TKI-HS)* – a situational judgement test consisting of 11 challenging interpersonal scenarios – this study compared how experienced teachers in England (n=108), Ireland (n=45) and Russia (n=492) rated seven possible response options for each scenario, to examine the extent to which the concept of “skilled interpersonal behavior” varies across cultures. The results indicate that judgments of “bad” responses are more similar across these three cultures, whereas there seems to be less agreement about what constitutes a “good” response. The importance of teachers’ tacit knowledge and how it varies across cultural contexts are discussed.

1. Objectives or purposes

The purpose of this study was to examine the extent to which teacher perceptions and understandings of skilled interpersonal behavior were invariant across three cultures with different histories and pedagogic practices. The specific research question was: Do experienced teachers across three different countries (England, Ireland and Russia) identify the same set of behavioral responses to interpersonal scenarios as being either “good” or “bad” strategies, or is it the case that the labelling of certain behavioral strategies as “good” or “bad” is relative to one’s cultural context?

2. Perspective(s) or theoretical framework

Research has demonstrated that there are two empirically distinguishable dimensions underlying supervisors' ratings of teacher effectiveness (Stemler, Elliott, McNeish, Grigorenko & Sternberg, 2012; Toff & Sessions, 2005). These dimensions are pedagogical orientation (e.g., the skilled teacher has a sound understanding of how to maximise student learning, is a master of his/her content area) and social orientation (e.g., the skilled teacher inspires students, demonstrates respect for colleagues, is enthusiastic). A substantial amount of educational research has been devoted to understanding how best to foster the development of teaching skills. However, the literature can give the misleading impression that such work solely concerns the provision of instruction (Stevenson & Stigler, 1994) and often neglects the fact that teaching routinely requires skilled management of complex social interactions with students, parents, administrators, and other teachers. Though not frequently discussed as a formal part of “teaching,” practical skills in dealing with others are very much a part of the essence of teaching (Grigorenko, Sternberg, & Strauss, 2006; Kunter et al., 2013; Stemler, Elliott, Grigorenko & Sternberg, 2006). Teachers who have not mastered such skills are likely to struggle to provide a sound teaching and learning environment and may be quicker to burn out and leave the profession (Ingersoll, 2003). The social and interpersonal aspect of teaching is important because a teacher’s ability to relate to students goes far beyond issues of management and control. The ability to establish and maintain positive relationships with students, marked by caring, understanding, and trust, has consistently been shown to foster student motivation and engagement (Midgley, Feldlaufer, & Eccles, 1989; Ryan & Patrick, 2001). In identifying schools that “beat the odds” by attaining higher than anticipated student achievement; quality interactions, marked by a deeply caring atmosphere and a unified sense of community, appear as significant factors (Langer, 2000).

A common assumption when evaluating interpersonal aspects of teaching is that behavioral differences among teachers reflect individual personality differences. However, empirical data suggest that personality differences may not be crucial determinants of teachers’ interpersonal skills. Specifically, Stemler and Elliott (2005) found that extraverts and introverts, when presented with a range of hypothetical problem situations, were equally likely to endorse certain response

strategies. There was no evidence of a systematic pattern whereby, for example, introverts gravitated toward conflict avoidance, or extraverts endorsed more confrontational strategies. This finding suggests that individual differences in teachers' selection of behavioral responses to challenging scenarios may be driven by other factors, such as a shared professional understanding of what constitutes skilled interpersonal behavior. As such a concept is tacit in nature, and thus not easily communicated, it might be expected that experience – rather than training – may play a role in the development of teachers' interpersonal skills. Indeed, Elliott, Stemler, Sternbeg, Grigorenko and Hoffman (2011) have provided evidence that supports this assertion.

With all of this in mind, an important question is whether culture may play a role in defining this “shared professional understanding of what constitutes skilled interpersonal behavior”. Are the things that lead a teacher to be perceived as great (or weak) culture-specific, or are such factors universal? In considering this question, it is important to conceptualize culture not as a single construct, but as an interwoven range of contexts in which individuals react in various ways (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; 2005). In this regard, Eade (2015, p.16) urged those considering the concept of teaching expertise to “*take account of the expectations of teachers resulting from policy at school and national level*” and warned against the assumption of cross-cultural generalisability. Currently, there appears to be a lack of quantitative research examining cross-cultural differences in the social orientation dimension of teaching (i.e., the ways that teachers believe that they should interact with students, parents, administrators, and other teachers). The present study represents an attempt to address this gap in the literature.

3. Methods, techniques, or modes of inquiry

The *TKI-HS* (Stemler et al., 2006) is a situational judgment test consisting of eleven scenarios describing challenging interpersonal situations that a teacher may encounter, involving either parents, students, administrators or colleagues. These scenarios were initially derived from structured interviews with practising teachers, and each is followed by seven response options, with participants required to rate the quality of each option. Each response option corresponds to one of seven distinct problem-solving strategies (*comply, consult, confer, avoid, delegate, legislate or retaliate*), defined in terms of the observable behaviours with which it is associated. Table 1 presents the defining characteristics and behaviours associated with each strategy, whilst Figures 1 and 2 present example scenarios and their corresponding response option sets. Note that in these examples, the problem-solving strategies are identified in brackets for clarification, but these were not included when presented to participants.

4. Data sources, evidence, objects, or materials

Using convenience and snowball sampling methods, samples of practising post-primary school teachers were recruited in England, Ireland and Russia. Teachers in England were drawn from two schools in the north of the country, those in Russia from schools concentrated in the city of St. Petersburg, and those in Ireland from schools all over the country, via personal contacts, teachers' unions and relevant social media. Given that the first five years in the teaching profession is regarded as a time of change and adaptation (Darling-Hammond, 2000), and that those who leave the profession during this period are less effective than those who remain (Henry, Bastian & Fortner, 2011), only teachers with at least five years' experience (England: $n = 108$, Ireland: $n = 45$, Russia $n = 492$) were included for the cross-cultural comparisons.

In both England and Russia, the *TKI-HS* was administered via paper and pencil, whilst in Ireland it was administered online. The instrument was also translated and/or culturally adapted where relevant. Once all data had been collected, descriptive statistics were run on teachers' ratings of the response options within each country. Response options were identified as "good", "bad" or "neutral" on the basis of these statistics¹.

5. Results and/or substantiated conclusions or warrants for arguments/point of view

Recall that the *TKI-HS* consists of 11 unique scenarios and that each scenario is followed by seven response options. Thus, participants were required to rate 77 different response options in total. Table 2 presents the numbers of response options identified as "good" and "bad", by strategy, for teachers in each of the three countries. In at least one of the three countries, 26 responses were categorized as "good", 19 were categorized as "bad" and the remaining responses were categorized as neutral, according to the empirical criteria. Across all three cultures, teachers agreed on three (11.5%) of the 26 "good" responses, and six (31.5%) of the 19 "bad" responses. Agreement regarding "good" and "bad" responses was also examined across individual pairs of countries (*i.e.* Ireland-England, Ireland-Russia, England-Russia). Generally, there appeared to be a greater consensus with respect to "bad" responses (see Table 3), although, in the case of Ireland and England, teachers agreed on just over half of both the "good" and the "bad" responses. Agreement was lowest between teachers in England and Russia with respect to "good" responses. It is acknowledged that these patterns are merely descriptive in nature, however, they are of interest, given the geographical proximity and cultural similarities between England and Ireland on the one hand, and the contrasts between many elements of English and Russian culture on the other, particularly with respect to fundamental beliefs regarding child development and education (Alexander, 2009).

Responses for which there was agreement across all three cultures had some commonalities in terms of the underlying problem-solving strategy. For example, three of the responses viewed as "bad" by teachers in all three countries involved the *avoid* strategy; whereby source of the problem is ignored, and three involved the *retaliate* strategy, which often involves escalating the situation. Similarly, two of the three responses that were viewed as "good" across all three cultures used the *confer* strategy, which involves articulating the problem to its source. Interestingly, some cultural disparity was also evident, with some strategies perceived as particularly "good" or "bad" in just one or two of the countries (see Figures 3 and 4). A striking example is that of the *consult* strategy: teachers in both England and Ireland rated five of these responses as "good", whilst teachers in Russia rated just one of these responses as "good". An additional example is that of the *delegate* strategy: teachers in England rated just one of these responses as "bad", whereas teachers in Ireland and Russia rated several of these responses as "bad". Of course, the extent to which these samples are representative of their respective populations is not assured, given the reliance on personal

¹ In England and Ireland, a seven-point scale was used to rate the response options; therefore, a "good" response required a mean greater than or equal to 5.5 and a median of 6 or higher, whilst a "bad" response required a mean of less than or equal to 2.5 and a median of 2 or lower. In Russia, a five-point scale was used, so a "good" response required a mean and median greater than or equal to 4, and a "bad" response required a mean and median less than or equal to 2.

contacts and self-selection methods during recruitment. Nonetheless, it should be appreciated that the existence of these disparities raises important questions about whether there is a universal 'professional knowledge base' related to the social aspect of teaching, and consequently, whether training and professional development in this area ought to be more culturally responsive.

6. Scientific or scholarly significance of the study or work

The ability to identify and develop highly effective teachers is of great importance for any educational system. It is somewhat surprising that a consensus definition of teacher effectiveness is still elusive in the literature, but perhaps part of the difficulty stems from the fact that teaching is a highly social activity. It follows that assessments of effectiveness that ignore this may not adequately capture the full range of important elements of teaching. With the advent of new situational judgment testing techniques, however, aspects of the social orientation dimension of teaching can now be assessed, and in this paper, we have shown that the *TKI-HS* instrument can provide important data about this dimension in different cultural contexts. Our results reveal that judgments regarding "bad" responses to challenging situations among experienced teachers are partially similar across cultures, with teachers from Ireland, England and Russia agreeing on approximately one-third of these. In contrast, judgments about "good" responses may be more culture-specific, as teachers in the three settings agreed on only approximately one-tenth of these. Unsurprisingly, the extent of agreement with regard to what is "effective" also appears to be greater across more similar cultures.

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Table 1. Defining characteristics and behaviours associated with each of the seven problem-solving strategies.

| Strategy | Defining characteristics and behaviours |
|-----------------|--|
| Comply | Actor does whatever is asked of him or her, regardless of who is asking Actor takes action that can be interpreted as actively condoning behaviours of others in the situation |
| Consult | Actor appeals to an external source for advice Actor asks people to work together to solve the problem |
| Confer | Actor engages in verbal discussion with source of interaction. Conversation takes place in a private, one-on-one setting and is characterized by rational explanation of the actor's point of view |
| Avoid | Actor avoids, delays or puts off dealing with a situation or problem No action is taken at all, or actions that are taken to not deal directly with the situation |
| Delegate | Actor either implicitly or explicitly delegates responsibility for taking action to someone else. Actor absolves him/herself of responsibility for action |
| Legislate | Actor explicates rules governing future actions of self and others |
| Retaliate | Actor reacts physically or verbally in direct response to a situation. Direct response is often like-for-like in nature and involves punishment. |

Susan, one of the girls in Ms. Wilson's 9th grade Spanish class, tends to perform below average on oral quizzes and multiple-choice tests. She did much better on a classroom project and on a paper about Spanish History though. The difference is so pronounced that Ms. Wilson thinks that maybe it was not Susan's work. She knows that Susan's father is a fluent Spanish speaker, so he could have helped her with the paper. Yet, the classroom project is still a puzzle. Ms. Wilson asks Susan whether the project is her work, and she affirms that it is. Susan's father calls Ms. Wilson the next day to tell her that he is upset that Ms. Wilson could even suspect his daughter would cheat.

Given the situation, please rate the extent to which you agree or disagree with each of the following statements.

| | | | | |
|--------------------------|-----------------|----------------|--------------|-----------------------|
| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| Strongly Disagree | Disagree | Neutral | Agree | Strongly Agree |

___1. [COMPLY] Ms. Wilson should tell Susan's father that she understands his concerns and is reassured now that they've had an opportunity to talk things through.

___2. [CONSULT] Ms. Wilson should ask Susan's other teachers and guidance counselor about Susan's performance on structured tests as compared with her projects and papers.

___3. [CONFER] Ms. Wilson should explain why she became suspicious about Susan's work, mentioning her low quiz and test scores.

___4. [AVOID] Ms. Wilson should tell Susan's father that she is on her way to a meeting and will call him back (with no intention of doing so).

___5. [DELEGATE] Ms. Wilson should tell Susan's father that she can put him in touch with the assistant principal who can field his concerns.

___6. [LEGISLATE] Ms. Wilson should inform Susan's father that she has a personal policy of following up on anyone she suspects of cheating.

___7. [RETALIATE] Ms. Wilson should explain to the father that she understands that he wants to help his daughter succeed, but doing Susan's work for her will only hurt his daughter in the long run.

Figure 1. Example scenario with response options

The department chairman at Mr. Jackson's school has asked each of the teachers in his department to put together a portfolio illustrating his or her accomplishments as a teacher this year. The project has a very short timeline and is in addition to his usual teaching tasks, but it is required by the department. Mr. Jackson really wants to do a great job, so he spends time working on it after school and during the weekend, and he is proud of the final product he turns in. When he receives his evaluation, it says only that his portfolio was "satisfactory," when the highest possible score was "excellent." Mr. Jackson feels that it deserves a higher mark, especially given the amount of time he put into it.

Given the situation, please rate the extent to which you agree or disagree with each of the following statements.

| | | | | |
|--------------------------|-----------------|----------------|--------------|-----------------------|
| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| Strongly Disagree | Disagree | Neutral | Agree | Strongly Agree |

- ___1. [COMPLY] Mr. Jackson should try to put more effort into future projects.
- ___2. [CONSULT] Mr. Jackson should talk to the department chair privately about his concerns.
- ___3. [CONFER] Mr. Jackson should talk to the department chair and tell him that he does not feel appreciated.
- ___4. [AVOID] Mr. Jackson should not make an issue out of it.
- ___5. [DELEGATE] Mr. Jackson should ask a colleague to advocate for him..
- ___6. [LEGISLATE] Mr. Jackson should simply ignore any future remarks on his portfolio, good or bad, from the department chair.
- ___7. [RETALIATE] Mr. Jackson should persuade his colleagues to oppose any extra assignments from the chair in the future.

Figure 2. Example scenario with response options

Table 2. Strategies Associated with Responses Identified as “Good” and “Bad” by Count across the three countries.

| | No. Responses Identified as “Good” | | | | | No. Responses Identified as “Bad” | | | | |
|--------------|------------------------------------|-----------|-----------|----------|-----------|-----------------------------------|-----------|-----------|----------|-----------|
| | Eng | Rus | Irl | Common* | Unique** | Eng | Rus | Irl | Common* | Unique** |
| Comply | 1 | 4 | 2 | 1 | 4 | 3 | 2 | 4 | 1 | 4 |
| Consult | 5 | 1 | 5 | 0 | 8 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 1 |
| Legislate | 1 | 2 | 2 | 0 | 4 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 1 |
| Delegate | 0 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 1 | 4 | 3 | 0 | 5 |
| Confer | 5 | 3 | 5 | 2 | 6 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| Avoid | 0 | 2 | 0 | 0 | 2 | 4 | 3 | 3 | 3 | 5 |
| Retaliate | 0 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 4 | 3 | 3 | 3 | 4 |
| Total | 12 | 14 | 14 | 3 | 26 | 12 | 14 | 13 | 6 | 19 |

*Common = total no. of response options representing each problem solving strategy that were identified as “good” (or “bad”) across all three countries (max possible value in any of these cells = 11)

**Unique = total no. of response options representing each problem solving strategy that were identified as “good”(or “bad”) in at least one of the three countries (max possible value in any of these cells = 11)

Table 3. Percentage agreement on “good” and “bad” responses between individual pairs of countries.

| <i>Percentage Agreement</i> | England | | Russia | |
|-----------------------------|-----------------------|----------------------|-----------------------|----------------------|
| | <i>Good Responses</i> | <i>Bad Responses</i> | <i>Good Responses</i> | <i>Bad Responses</i> |
| Ireland | 52.9% | 56.3% | 23.8% | 56.3% |
| England | | | 13.0% | 44.0% |

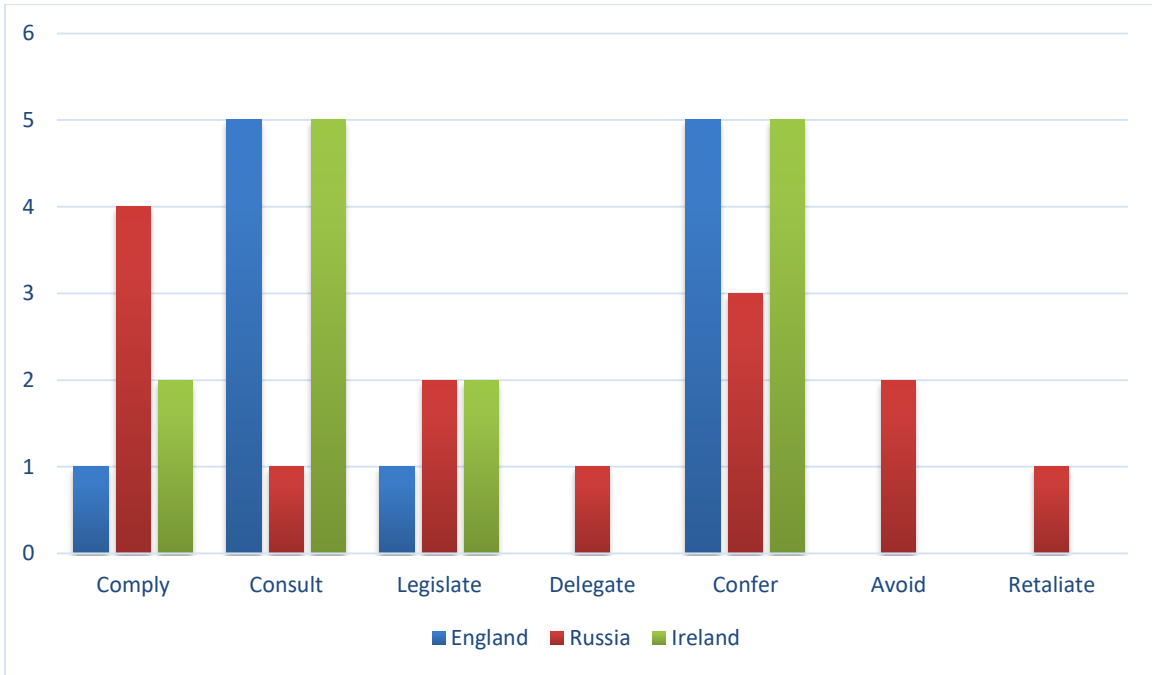


Figure 3: "Good" Responses by Strategy Type across the three cultures

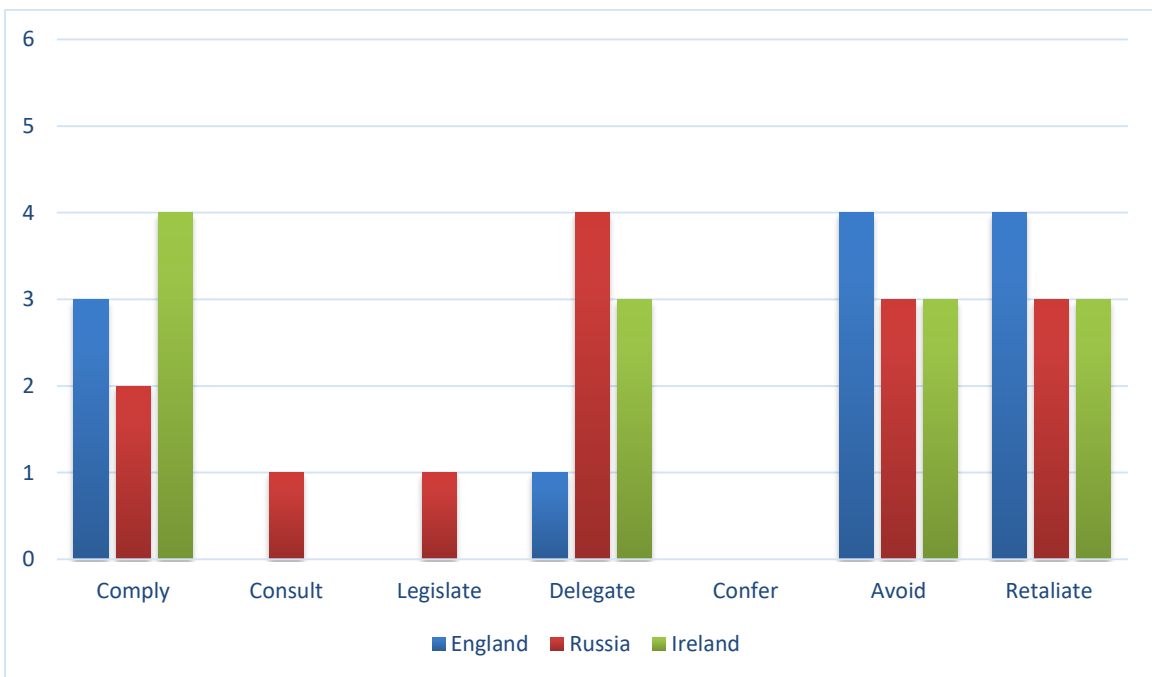


Figure 4: "Bad" Responses by Strategy Type across the three cultures