



## Factors Influencing Assertiveness of Prospective Teachers of the University of Colombo, Sri Lanka

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### Abstract

*This study aimed to measure assertiveness of the prospective teachers of the Faculty of Education, University of Colombo and to determine the factors influencing assertiveness. The sample comprised of 100 female undergraduates representing all three media of instruction; Sinhala, Tamil and English. The participants in the sample were selected using a stratified sampling technique. Assertiveness was measured using the original and the translated versions of The Rathus Assertiveness Schedule. Ex-post facto survey design was used. Analysis of data was done descriptively as well as inferentially using chi square test for association. Findings indicated that approximately two third of the students were seemed to be possessing assertive behaviour. Compared to non-assertiveness of Sinhala and Tamil media groups, majority of the participants in English medium group was found to be categorized as having non-assertiveness. Among the demographic variables that influence assertiveness of students, medium of instruction and father's occupational levels were found to be statistically significantly associated with assertiveness. The study recommended carrying out a longitudinal survey on assertiveness of students before and after they are enrolled to the Faculty of Education to determine whether the lowered level of assertiveness is because of English as a medium of instruction and to introduce assertiveness skills training program intending to improve assertiveness of the first year Arts students.*

**Keywords:** Assertiveness, demographic variables, Bachelor of Education, prospective teachers, medium of instruction.

### Introduction

Teacher assertiveness has begun to gain more attention in Sri Lanka while public and the stake holders of schools have tended to question the quality of educational system despite the prevailing youth (15-24 years) literacy rate male 97.7%, female 98.6%, near universal primary enrollment rate male 98.1%, female 96.7% and primary completion rate 100.8%<sup>1</sup>. All these statistics have revealed the changes that have occurred in quantitative aspects of education. They do not reflect anything that are related to teacher quality which is one of the predictors of students' performance. Quality of education depends upon quality of teachers. Among various qualities that teachers should have possessed in order to make the process and the outcomes of teaching and learning to be more efficient and effective, the trait of teacher assertiveness plays a major role when teachers move away from their traditional roles to become changing agents where they have to maintain effective interaction with school community. Assertiveness is considered as a measure of interpersonal communication competence. It improves self-confidence which enables one to create free, honest and healthy relationship with others. Whereas non-assertiveness results in displaying inappropriate behaviours when resolving conflicts, and enforcing disciplinary strategies, confrontational with students and use of inappropriate language which in turn will make the teaching learning environment more stressful to both teachers and students. If teachers are working

under stressful environment for a long, they will experience a condition called burnout which can have serious consequences for the health and happiness of teachers. Hence it is imperative to study about the assertiveness of teachers. Therefore, the present study sought to examine the assertiveness of prospective teachers and to determine the factors that influence teacher assertiveness.

Numerous studies have confirmed the important influence of teacher behaviour on student achievement<sup>2</sup>. For example, Brophy and Good showed that the key determinant of student achievement is the teacher behaviour<sup>3</sup>. Many previous studies conducted in Sri Lanka to determine the academic success of students support these findings. Recent study on National Assessment of Achievement of Grades 8 and 10 students carried out by National Education Research and Evaluation Centre (NEREC, 2007) showed that, of the most important latent school background variables, teacher background ( $r=.798$  for grade 8 and  $r=.743$  for grade 10) plays a major role on influencing students' academic success<sup>4</sup>. Teacher development incorporating teacher well-being is one of the themes for which more attention has been paid in Education Sector Development Framework and Program (ESDFP, 2006-2010) implemented by the Ministry of Education in order to improve the quality of education<sup>5</sup>.

However, all these findings were seemed to be the indication of quantitative changes in terms of academic achievement of students, yet the quality of education requires attention. In other words, these findings have merely revealed the magnitude of student successes, one of the indicators (achievement in literacy and numeracy) of quality outcomes without taking into account the indicators of teacher quality including teacher attributes such as; psychosocial and interpersonal skills, teacher morale, and teaching attitude etc. Many previous studies conducted to determine school quality have repeatedly showed students' academic success as a quality indicator because it can be measured easily using standardized tests. Since such less tangible outcomes as teacher quality, teacher morale, teacher attitude, etc., may be more complex and difficult to measure, the studies carried out in the past in this regard were very few. Hence, the study measuring teacher assertiveness is timely and important.

Assertiveness is a personality trait describing the way people behave when they want to express something without being aggressive. "Assertiveness involves standing up for personal rights and expressing thoughts, feelings and beliefs in direct, honest and appropriate ways which do not violate another person's rights"<sup>6</sup>. It helps to defend one's rights without violating the rights of others. Assertive people will express emotions, needs, and opinions without hurting those of others. An assertive person will not surrender his/her own wants and needs to please others. An assertive person is usually self-confident with high self-esteem. He/she does not give more importance to the opinion of others and he/she doesn't submissively comply with any demand that others make of him.

Assertive teachers are considered as valuable assets to educational institutions than the aggressive and timid teachers. They are having such personality traits as honest, patient, objective, compassion, confidant, leader, tolerant, smiling, and open to new things, being good models to their children with their optimistic thoughts and behaviors. Because of having these traits they are found to be more successful in their jobs. On the other hand, teachers who are either aggressive or timid are found to be not taking any responsibility for their professional behaviour. Submissive teachers can be manipulated easily and directed in a wrong way, whereas aggressive teachers tend to make colleagues feel undervalued and worthless. Assertiveness is not only regarded as an important skill for effective teaching, but also it helps to improve an individual's interpersonal communication competence in a school context<sup>7</sup>.

Hence, teacher education programs should be targeted not only for the development of pedagogical skills of teachers; teaching of how to teach, rather in the pedagogical preparation for teachers, equal attention should be given to soft skills development as well. These programs should be developed in such a way as to prepare assertive teachers who are able to be part of school's continuous affairs involved in the uplifting of its standards, to be able and have opportunities to work

collaboratively with their colleagues in designing learning environments, addressing the issues of children with special needs, developing themselves professionally and academically. Through teacher training, in addition to the inculcation of the knowledge, skills and attitude pertaining to teaching, the programs should be aimed to transform good teachers into great leaders.

As a teacher training institution, the Faculty of Education of the University of Colombo produces about one thousand teachers every year by providing pre-service and in-service training to serve in the public as well as in the private schools. The undergraduates who are undergoing pre-service training are able to become fully fledged teachers only after completing their four year special degree course, Bachelor of Education (B.Ed). Therefore, they have to be equipped with appropriate social skills in order to survive in their working environment. As prospective teachers they should develop high level of assertiveness in order to enhance the quality of interpersonal communication in schools. When compare with Westerners, Asian teachers are placed in a less favourable state in situations in which assertiveness is highly regarded, thus, assessment of teacher assertiveness is imperative.

Very few studies were conducted on assertiveness of undergraduates so that this study is significant to assess the assertiveness among B.Ed Part I students. Specifically, this study is interested in examining assertiveness and factors that impact on the level of assertiveness of prospective teachers. The hypotheses were formulated to determine whether there are any significant differences existed in the assertiveness levels of students in terms of student demographics such as ethnicity, medium of instruction, birth order, and parents' educational and occupational levels.

## Methodology

**Research Design:** The ex-post facto survey research design was adopted because the study went out to gather information that has already existed among the population under study and the variables of interest in the study were not consciously or deliberately manipulated for this purpose.

**Participants:** One hundred and forty one students of the University of Colombo who have been currently enrolled in the Faculty of Education to continue their first year Bachelor of Education (B.Ed- I- 2014) degree course after completing their first year in the Faculty of Arts were the population of this study. Of the students, 92 were following the course in Sinhala medium, 22 were in English medium and 27 were in Tamil medium. The sample comprised 100 female students representing two ethnic groups, Sinhala (81%) and Muslim (19%) and three media of instructions, Sinhala (65%), Tamil (19%) and the English (16%) and the sampling was made using a proportionate stratified sampling technique.

**Instrument:** Assertive behaviour of the prospective teachers was measured using the self-reporting Rathus Assertiveness Schedule (RAS). The RAS was developed in 1977 by Rathus with the intention of measuring timidity and audacity behaviour of both adults and teenagers. The original version that has high split half reliability<sup>8,9</sup> and high test-retest reliability<sup>10</sup> comprising 30 items was translated into Tamil and Sinhala Languages to meet the requirement of the students. The English version was used as it is. The responses were rated in a 6-point Likert type rating scale ranging from “very much like me” by providing 3 scores to “very much unlike me” by providing -3 scores. The total score ranges between -90 and +90. The positive value of the total score was marked as “assertive” and the negative value was marked as “non-assertive”. Respondent’s ethnicity, medium of instruction, birth order, and parents’ educational and occupation levels were treated as independent variables.

**Data Analysis:** Analysis of data was made using Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) in a quantitative manner. Descriptive statistics were used to analyze the scores obtained from the RAS to determine the assertiveness levels and the chi square test was adopted to test the hypotheses to determine the influence of demographic variables on assertiveness.

## Results and Discussion

Frequency and percentage of respondents who were categorized as assertive and non –assertive based on the scores obtained in RAS in terms of ethnicity and the medium of instruction are presented in Table - 1. The results show that, of the participants 64% of the students were seemed to be having assertive behaviour and the remaining 36% were categorized as having non-assertive behaviour. Hence, in this batch majority of the students was found to be assertive. When considering the assertiveness and non-assertiveness of respondents in terms of

ethnicity, 64.2% of Sinhalese and 63.2% of Muslim students were categorized as possessing assertiveness whereas 35.8% and 36.8% of them were described as having non-assertive behaviour. This indicates that the students with assertive as well as non-assertive behaviour were more or less equally distributed across the two ethnic groups. However, in considering the medium of instruction, 62.5%, 36.8% and 29.2% of respondents who were in English, Tamil and Sinhala media of instruction respectively show non-assertive behaviour. This indicates that majority of students who were in English medium group was found to be with non-assertive behaviours. When compare the percentage of respondents who show assertive behaviour across medium of instruction groups, in Sinhala medium 70.8% in Tamil 63.2% and in English 37.5% of the respondents were categorized as possessing assertive behavior which indicates that the Sinhala medium students were seemed to be more assertive than the students of other two media of instructions.

Results of chi square analysis presented in Table - 2 in order to determine the relationship between the selected independent variables and percentage assertiveness reveal that the medium of instruction ( $\chi^2 (2) = 6.175, p < .05$ ) and father’s occupational levels ( $\chi^2 (2) = 10.74, p < .05$ ) were statistically significantly related to the assertiveness levels of the prospective teachers. This indicates that the medium of instruction and father’s occupation have a statistically significant influence on the differences in the assertiveness levels among these prospective teachers when compare with ethnicity, birth order, educational levels of parents and mother’s occupation which show no relationship with the assertive behaviour. These findings support the findings of Geraldine, Steve and Don (2001) where they have shown that birth order did not statistically significantly related to the assertiveness of undergraduates whereas significant differences existed between levels of assertiveness for ethnicity<sup>11</sup>.

**Table-1**  
**Frequency and percentage of respondents who are categorized as assertive and non- assertive in terms of ethnicity and medium of instruction**

Variables	Category	Assertive		Non-assertive	
		Number	Percentage	Number	Percentage
Ethnicity	Sinhala	52	64.2	29	35.8
	Muslim	12	63.2	7	36.8
	Total	64	64.0	36	36.0
Medium of Instruction	Sinhala	46	70.8	19	29.2
	Tamil	12	63.2	07	36.8
	English	06	37.5	10	62.5
	Total	64	64.0	36	36.0

**Table-2**  
**Significant level corresponding to chi square value of the relationship between the selected independent variables and the assertiveness of the prospective teachers**

Independent Variables	Category	Chi square value	df	Sig. at 0.05 level
Ethnicity	Sinhalese, Muslim	0.007	1	NS
Medium of Instruction	Sinhala Tamil English	6.175	2	Sig.
Birth Order	Eldest Youngest In between	0.385	2	NS
Father's Education	Up to O/L Up to A/L Graduate	0.172	2	NS
Mother's Education	Up to O/L Up to A/L Graduate	2.270	2	NS
Father's Occupation	Professional Non-Professional Retired	10.74	2	Sig.
Mother's Occupation	Professional Non-Professional House-wife	1.367	2	NS

### Conclusion

Participants who were following in English medium were found to be more timid than those who were in the other two media. Despite the students who were selected from the same field of study in the Faculty of Arts to follow a B.Ed course in the Faculty of Education, the differences existed in the assertiveness levels may lead to a question that “is it as a result of the groupings made to follow the course in various media of instruction”. Therefore, it is necessary to take further action to assess the level of assertiveness of these prospective teachers at different stages particularly when students who are in first year in the Faculty of Arts, second year and then in final year in the Faculty of Education to make sure whether the design of the B.Ed course might be one of the influencing factors to reduce the assertiveness among them.

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