



Exploring Relations between Pre-Service English Teachers' Psychological and Social Well-Being and their Perceptions of Positive Classroom Environment

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Abstract

This paper reports on findings of a research study that sought to investigate the relationship between classroom environment and candidate teachers' social and psychological wellbeing. Dimensions of psychological and social well-being models include constructs such as personal growth, positive relations with others, and social contribution. Such constructs have impacts on teachers' creating a positive classroom environment, which is a predictor of students' academic achievement. Therefore, this study aims at exploring whether and how psychological and social well-being shape candidate teachers' perceptions of positive classroom environment. To address the focus of this study, the data were collected from 157 senior students at the English Language Teaching department through three questionnaires. The questionnaires measured mainly three variables: Participants' perceptions of positive classroom environment and their psychological and social well-being. The relationships between these variables were tested through Structural Equation Model (SEM) using AMOS (22.0). The results of the study revealed some significant relationships between some of the dimensions only, which may indicate that the participant pre-service teachers are expected to promote positive classroom environment in some aspects, but not all. Regarding this, the study provides valuable suggestions to be included in teacher development programs.

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Keywords: positive functioning; positive classroom environment; teacher well-being; psychological well-being; social well-being

1. Introduction

Classroom environment is probably one of the most powerful determinants influencing the extent and efficiency of student learning. Establishing learning environments where students feel psychologically, socially, and culturally secure is an important responsibility of a teacher. Especially in language learning classrooms, creating a non-threatening classroom atmosphere is a must for students to be able to take risks in order to use the target language for communicative purposes. For a

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positive learning environment, teachers need more than pedagogical knowledge and classroom management skills.

A number of factors contribute to creating a conducive learning environment. Besides many teaching qualifications, also important is teacher’s positive functioning, specifically in terms of psychological and social well-being. Well-being, in general scope, is operationalized as the subjective evaluation of life via satisfaction and affect (Keyes, 1998). As Lopez and Snyder (2003) emphasizes “the focus of psychological well-being remains at the individual level whereas relations with others and the environment are the primary aims of social well-being” (p. 413). According to Ryff and Keyes (1995), positive psychological functioning is the presence of more positive than negative perceived self-attributes. But, as the researchers further add, since individuals are embedded in social structures, in order to understand optimal functioning, individual’s social well-being should be considered as well. Social well-being is defined as the appraisal of one’s functioning in society. As review of relevant literature shows, dimensions of psychological and social well-being models include constructs such as environmental mastery, positive relations with others, social contribution and social integration. Such constructs have impacts on creating a positive classroom environment, which is a predictor of students’ academic achievement.

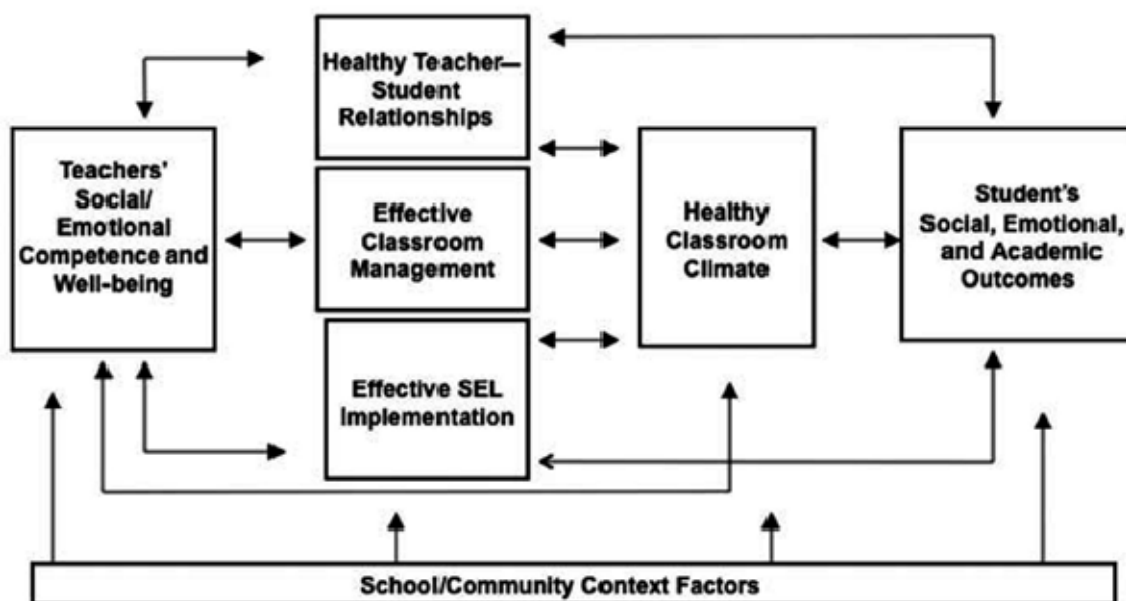


Figure 1. A Model for Teachers’ Social and Emotional Competence and Classroom Environment and Student Outcomes (taken from Jennings and Greenberg, 2009)

A positive classroom environment encourages students to be more excited about their learning (Evertson, Emmer, & Worsham, 2006). An optimal classroom climate is characterized by low levels of conflict and disruptive behavior, smooth transitions

from one type of activity to another, appropriate expressions of emotion, respectful communication and problem solving, strong interest and focus on task, and supportiveness and responsiveness to individual differences and students' needs (La Paro & Pianta, 2003). Jennings and Greenberg (2009) propose a prosocial classroom model highlighting the mutual relation among various factors (see Figure 1).

The prosocial classroom model highlights the importance of teachers' social and emotional competence and well-being in the development of supportive teacher-student relationship and effective classroom management, which have a bidirectional relationship with healthy classroom environment. So, as relevant literature confirms, a teacher's psychological and social well-being has a direct influence over the classroom environment. According to La Paro et al. (2009), teacher psychological variables are stronger predictors of classroom quality than experience and educational attainment. When teachers experience mastery over these social and emotional challenges, teaching becomes more enjoyable, and they feel more efficacious (Goddard, Hoy, & Woolfolk Hoy, 2004).

While there is ample research emphasizing the relationship between teacher psychological and social well-being and teacher functioning (in terms of setting healthy teacher-student relationships and effective classroom management), Jennings and Greenberg (2009) argue that little research has explored how a teacher's psychological and social competence and well-being may be associated with the variables of optimal classroom environment. Therefore, according to these researchers, more research is needed to establish the relationships between specific dimensions of teacher psychological and social qualifications and positive classroom environment. To this end, this study aims at exploring whether and how psychological well-being and social well-being shape pre-service teachers' perceptions of positive classroom environment. Based on this aim and related literature, the study formulated the following hypotheses:

1. Pre-service teachers' psychological well-being has a significant effect on their perceptions of positive classroom environment.
2. Pre-service teachers' social well-being has a significant effect on their perceptions of positive classroom environment.

2. Method

2.1. Participants

A total of 157 participants (112 females and 45 males) took part in this study. All the participants were senior students pursuing a degree in the English Language Teaching departments at two universities in the southern part of Turkey. The participants were aged 21-29 years (Mean=22.8; S.D.=1.73). The selection of the participants was based on convenience sampling at the universities where the researchers of this study were working. In the departments of these universities, the first year is mostly devoted to language related courses; in the following years, they

take courses that equip them with necessary qualities to become teachers of English as a foreign language.

2.2. Instruments

In order to test the hypotheses of the study, three instruments were used to collect the data and test the hypotheses of this study: psychological and social well-being scales for the independent variables, and classroom environment scale for the dependent variable.

2.2.1. Psychological Well-Being Scale

The Psychological Well-Being Scale (Ryff and Keyes, 1995) focuses on six distinct dimensions each of which signifies the challenges that individuals face as they strive to function fully and realize their unique talents. When put together, the dimensions cover a range of wellness: Personal Growth (having close interpersonal relations based on trust); Self-Acceptance (positive attitude toward the self, acknowledging and accepting multiple aspects of the self, and feeling positive about past life); Autonomy (self-determination and independence); Purpose in Life (having goals and sense of direction); and Environmental Mastery (feeling competent and being able to manage a complex environment).

Each dimension in the scale consisted of three seven-point Likert-type items compiled in a total of 18-item questionnaire (strongly disagree=1, somewhat disagree=2, a little disagree= 3, don't know= 4, a little agree= 5; somewhat agree= 6, strongly agree= 7). Eight items were reverse coded as suggested by Ryff and Keyes (1995). The reliability analysis based on the Cronbach's alpha value revealed .74 for the scale.

2.2.2. Social Well-Being Scale

To investigate the social well-being of the participants, the Social Well-Being Scale of Keyes (1998) was used. Consisting of five dimensions, the scale in general presents "social challenges that constitute possible dimensions of social wellness" (Keyes, 1998, p. 122). The five dimensions in the scale are as follows: Social Contribution (belief that one is a vital member of society); Social Coherence (perception of the quality, organization and operation of the social world); Social Integration (evaluation of the quality of one's relationship to society and community); Social Actualization (evaluation of the potential and the trajectory of society); and Social Acceptance (construal of society through the character and qualities of other people as a generalized category).

This scale consisted of 15 items assessed with seven-point Likert-type items (strongly disagree=1, moderately disagree=2, slightly disagree= 3, don't know= 4, slightly agree= 5; moderately agree= 6, strongly agree= 7). Eight items were reverse coded as suggested by the original scale. The alpha reliability for this scale was .68.

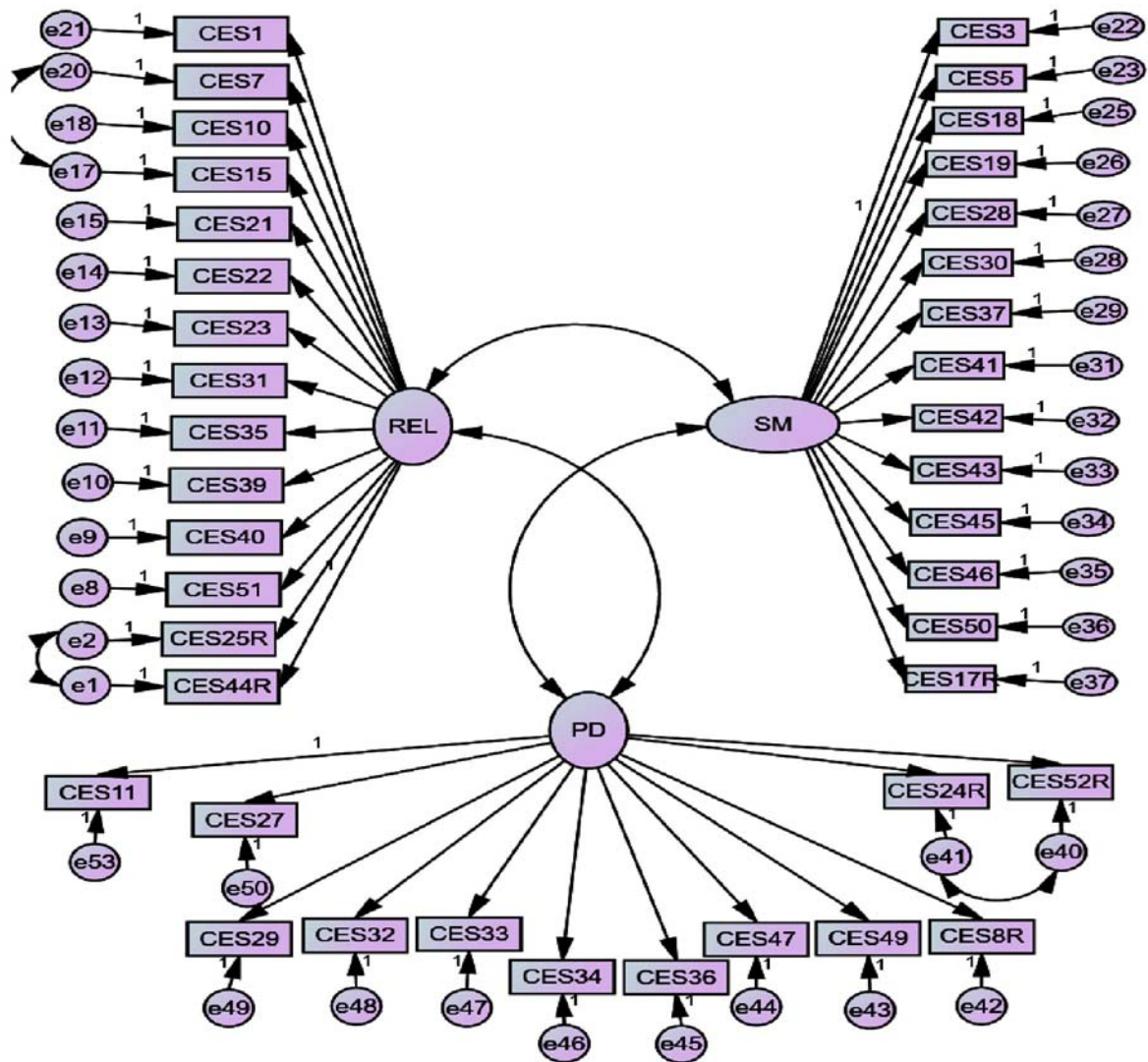


Figure 2. Confirmatory Factor Analysis of Classroom Environment Survey

2.2.3. Classroom Environment Survey

Classroom Environment Survey was mainly based on the Classroom Environment Scale (CES) of Fisher and Fraser (1983) and Fraser (1998). The original CES was based on Moos' three conceptual dimensions that categorized psychosocial environments (Fisher and Fraser, 1983, pp. 4-5): *Relationship Dimension* (nature and intensity of personal relationship within the environment); *Personal Development Dimension* (basic directions along which personal growth and self-enhancement may occur); and *System Maintenance and Change Dimension* (the extent to which the environment is orderly, clear in expectations, maintains control and is responsive to change). Within the framework of these dimensions, CES is composed of nine constructs of classroom environment, each having 10 true-false types of items.

However, classroom environment research has yielded some other scales such as Learning Environment Inventory, My Class Inventory, and Individualized Classroom Environment Questionnaire, each having some similar and different constructs. For the sake of this study, through analysis of literature (Altaf, 2015; Bartelheim and Conn, 2014; Boren, Callahan, and Peugh, 2011; Fisher and Fraser, 1983, 1985; Fraser, 1983, 1998), a total of 53 constructs in these scales were compiled under the three dimensions. The constructs and their descriptions were presented in a 7-point Likert-type questionnaire and the participants were asked to rate these constructs considering to what extent they perceived these should exist in the classroom (1= Never; 7= All the time). Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) was conducted to determine the fit characteristics of the scale (see Figure 2). During the process of this analysis some constructs were deleted to reach the good fit to the data. Accordingly, the number of the constructs after the analysis was reduced to 40 (Relationship=14 items; Personal Development/Goal Orientation=12 items; System Maintenance and Change=14 items). As seen in Table 1, the dimensions of the survey were considered acceptable ($\chi^2=1310$; $df= 734$; GFI=.80; CFI= .90; RMSEA= .06). Although GFI and CFI were below the acceptable fit measures, considering the other measures of the sub-dimensions, the analysis was accepted to indicate a good fit to the data.

Table 1. Fit Measures of the Confirmatory Factor Analysis for Classroom Environment Survey

	X²	Df	X²/df	GFI	CFI	RMSEA
Classroom Environment	1310.62	734	1.786	0.80	0.90	0.06
Relationship	140.88	75	1.88	0.88	0.94	0.08
Personal Development / Goal Orientation	67.62	53	1.28	0.93	0.97	0.04
System Maintenance and Change	100.03	77	1.30	0.92	0.95	0.04
Good Fit			≤3	≥0.90	≥0.97	≤0.05
Acceptable Fit			≤4-5	0.89-0.85	≥0.95	0.06-0.08

2.3. Data analysis

To test the hypotheses, three analyses were conducted: CFA, Descriptive Statistics, and Structural Equation Modelling (SEM). CFA was run to check for the fit characteristics of the classroom environment constructs to the three dimensions, namely relationship, personal development, and system maintenance and change. Details were presented in the previous section, Classroom Environment Survey Instrument. Descriptive statistics helped investigate the participants' psychological and social well-being as well as their perceptions of positive classroom environment. Average scores and standard deviations of the dimensions were calculated through SPSS, version 20. SEM was conducted to test the hypothesized model: prospective

teachers' psychological and social well-being have an effect on their perceptions of positive classroom environment.

3. Results

3.1. Pre-service teachers' positive functioning

The first step of the study was to investigate the participants' positive functioning in terms of their psychological and social well-being. As seen in Table 2, they generally scored higher for psychological well-being, ranging from 4.78 to 6.00 than for social well-being, ranging from 3.34 to 5.06. It seemed that the participants' psychological functioning was high: all areas scored above average. However, the most highly scored area was Personal Growth, which might mean that most of the participants were aware of their own potential and that they were open to experience challenges in various conditions. The next two highly scored areas, Positive Relations with Others and Self-Acceptance also presented that many of the participants had the ability to have warm, trusting, and intimate relationships with others and that they had positive attitudes towards themselves.

Table 2. Descriptive Statistics for Pre-Service Students' Positive Functioning

Dimensions	Mean	S.D.
<i>Psychological Well-Being</i>		
Personal Growth	6.00	1.02
Positive Relationship with Others	5.24	1.29
Self-Acceptance	5.23	1.11
Autonomy	4.90	1.10
Purpose in Life	4.83	1.29
Environmental Mastery	4.78	1.00
<i>Social Well-Being</i>		
Social Contribution	5.06	1.30
Social Coherence	4.39	1.30
Social Integration	4.24	1.19
Social Actualization	3.62	1.36
Social Acceptance	3.34	1.03

N= 157; *min*= 1; *max*= 7

The participants' social functioning, on the other hand, was not that high. Though above average, even the most highly area of this scale, *Social Contribution*, was below the first three areas of psychological well-being. Still, this shows that many of the participants believed they had something valuable to give to the society. The two lowest areas, *Social Actualization* and *Social Acceptance* indicated that most of the participants did not believe the society was evolving positively and that they did not trust other people.

Table 3. Descriptive Statistics for Students' Perceptions of Positive Classroom Environment

Item no	Constructs / Descriptions	Mean	S.D.
*Relationship			
35	Helpful/Friendly Teacher is friendly and helpful towards students.	6.16	1.26
21	Deference Students show respect to the opinions of others	6.14	1.38
31	Personal Relevance English connects students' out-of-class experiences	5.42	1.58
10	Participation Students participate and have a say in the method and content of instruction	5.22	1.42
Total Dimension		5.84	1.02
*System Maintenance and Change			
42	Goal Direction Goals are clearly stated.	6.20	1.26
17(R)	Disorganization Classroom activities are confusing and poorly organized	5.98	1.54
43	Rule Clarity Rules and the consequences for rules-breaking are clear and teacher deals consistently with students who break rules	5.27	1.55
45	Individualization Teacher treats students on basis of ability, learning style, interests, and rate of working	4.84	1.90
Total Dimension		5.55	.84
*Personal Development / Goal Orientation			
11	Integration In-class activities are integrated with real-life language use	5.80	1.53
49	Investigation Teacher encourages problem solving and investigation	5.76	1.41
27	Critical Voice Students feel that it is legitimate and beneficial to question the teachers' pedagogical plans and methods	4.86	1.85
36	Student Direction Students determine specific activities or outcomes of the lesson	4.68	1.48
Total Dimension		5.26	.86

N=137; min=1; max= 7

**only 2 most and least highly scored items were displayed*

3.2. Pre-service teachers' perceptions of positive classroom environment

Second step was to investigate the participants' perceptions of positive classroom environment. Table 3 demonstrates only the two most and least highly scored constructs under the three dimensions of Classroom Environment Survey. As seen in the table the highest mean score was for the Relationship dimension (m=5.84) which implied that teacher-student, student-student, student-learning, and teacher-self relationships were important factors of positive classroom environment. Among the constructs under the relationship dimension, teacher's friendly attitude towards students (m=6.16) and students' respect to each other (m=6.14) were the highest. Even the two least scored constructs (Personal Relevance and Participation) were scored much above the average (5.42 and 5.22).

The second highest dimension, System Maintenance and Change ($m=5.55$), indicated that having organized and clear activities and goals and being ready to change according to individual differences were also important elements of positive classroom behavior. Having clearly stated goals ($m=6.20$) and well-organized activities (5.98) received the highest scores for this dimension. The lowest-scored construct, individualization, was still above average ($m=4.84$).

Personal Development/Goal Orientation was the third dimension with a 5.26 mean score. This showed that helping students to develop themselves was also important for positive classroom environment. The constructs in this dimension were scored lower than the others, but it is possible to state that the participants found integrating activities with real-life language ($m=5.80$) and promoting problem-solving tasks ($m= 5.76$) as important elements. Within this dimension, there were some constructs, such as critical voice and student dimension, which were not perceived to be as important as the others. Although these constructs were slightly above average (4.86 and 4.68 respectively), the prospective teachers did not perceive student-directed activities and students' critical voices in the classroom vital for positive classroom environment.

3.3. Effects of positive functioning on pre-service teachers' perceptions of positive classroom environment

To test whether positive functioning had an effect on the participants' perceptions of positive classroom environment, SEM was applied (Figure 3). The analysis confirmed that the model indicated a reasonable fit to the data ($\chi^2(74)= 123.97$; $\chi^2/d.f.=1.675$; GFI= .90; CFI= .93; RMSEA= .06). SEM analysis revealed the positive impact of psychological well-being, but not social well-being, on the participants' perceptions of positive classroom environment because the relationship between psychological well-being and classroom environment perceptions was significant ($p=.030$) whereas social well-being relationship was not significant ($p=.146$). Thus, only the first hypothesis was accepted: Prospective teachers' psychological well-being had an effect on their perceptions of positive classroom environment.

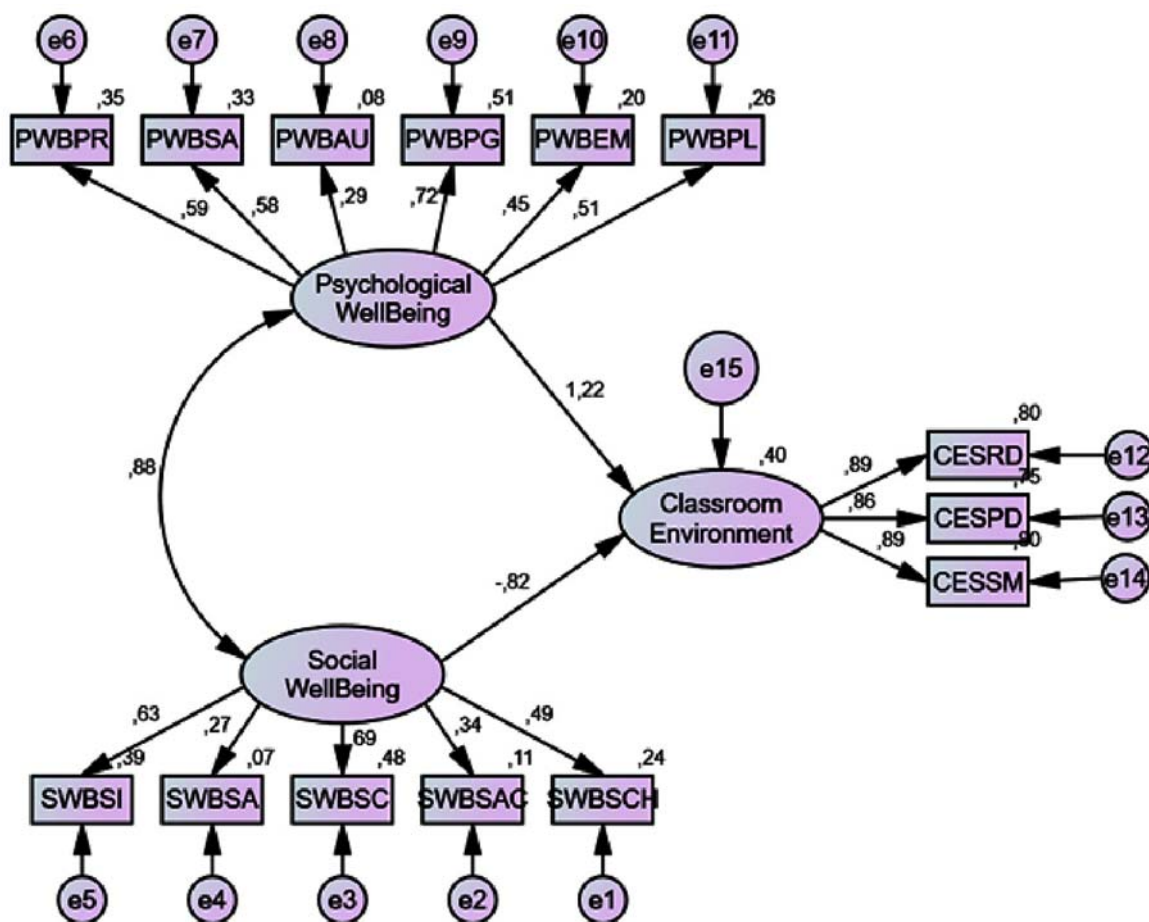


Figure 3. Structural Equation Model for the Effect of Psychological and Social Well-Being Variables on Classroom Environment Perceptions

SEM analysis was also applied to all dimensions of the psychological and social well-being scales separately to further investigate the relationships. Table 4 demonstrates the relationships for the dimensions of psychological well-being. This further analysis revealed that not all of the dimensions of psychological well-being had an effect on participants’ perceptions. Only self-acceptance, personal growth, and positive relations were statistically significant. In other words, having positive attitude towards the self, continuously searching for their own skills and opportunities, and having warm and trusting relationships were indicators of the participants’ perceptions of positive classroom environment.

Social well-being in general was not found to have an effect on positive classroom environment perceptions; however, further analysis revealed that social contribution and social coherence dimensions were significant factors (Table 5). This meant that the belief of having something valuable to give to the society and caring about the society were indicators of prospective teachers’ perceptions of positive classroom environment.

Table 4. Regression Weights for Psychological Well-Being and Classroom Environment Dimensions

Independent Variables	Dependent Variables	Estimates	S.E.	C.R.	p.
*Self-Acceptance	Relationship	2.10	.62	3.35	.000
	System Maintenance and Change	2.31	.68	3.39	.000
	Personal Development	2.35	.69	3.40	.000
*Personal Growth	Relationship	2.30	.75	3.07	.002
	System Maintenance and Change	2.50	.81	3.09	.002
	Personal Development	2.53	.81	3.10	.002
*Positive Relations	Relationship	3.75	1.91	1.96	.050
	System Maintenance and Change	4.12	2.09	1.96	.049
	Personal Development	4.21	2.13	1.97	.049
Environmental Mastery	Relationship	2.66	1.45	1.82	.067
	System Maintenance and Change	2.95	1.60	1.83	.066
	Personal Development	2.97	1.61	1.83	.066
Autonomy	Relationship	5.33	3.37	3.37	.114
	System Maintenance and Change	5.85	3.69	3.69	.113
	Personal Development	5.95	3.75	3.75	.112
Purpose in Life	Relationship	5.80	6.17	.94	.347
	System Maintenance and Change	6.29	6.68	.94	.347
	Personal Development	6.44	6.85	.94	.346

*statistically significant at .05 level

Table 5. Regression Weights for Social Well-Being and Classroom Environment Dimensions

Independent Variables	Dependent Variables	Estimates	S.E.	C.R.	p.
*Social Contribution	Relationship	2.99	1.18	2.52	.012
	System Maintenance and Change	3.27	1.28	2.53	.011
	Personal Development	3.34	1.30	2.54	.011
*Social Coherence	Relationship	2.88	1.32	2.17	.030
	System Maintenance and Change	3.15	1.44	2.18	.029
	Personal Development	3.21	1.46	2.18	.029
Social Actualization	Relationship	8.03	9.55	.84	.401
	System Maintenance and Change	8.80	10.47	.84	.400
	Personal Development	8.94	10.63	.84	.400
Social Acceptance	Relationship	9.89	13.99	.70	.480
	System Maintenance and Change	10.85	15.35	.70	.480
	Personal Development	11.01	15.57	.70	.479
Social Integration	Relationship	10.61	16.27	.65	.514
	System Maintenance and Change	11.59	17.77	.65	.514
	Personal Development	11.80	18.08	.65	.514

*statistically significant at .05 level

4. Discussion and conclusion

The findings demonstrate that participants of this study, pre-service teachers, revealed moderate to high levels of positive functioning in general. This finding is significant considering the fact that teachers' positive functioning is directly related to students' achievement and the quality of schooling (Bullough and Hall-Kenyon, 2012; Bullough and Pinnegar, 2009; Day, Elliot and Kingston, 2005; Ilgan, Ozu-Cengiz, Ata and Akram, 2015; McCallum and Price, 2010). Well-being as a form of positive functioning is considered to be psychological (Ryff, 1985) and social (Keyes, 1998). This study revealed that only some dimensions of the psychological (personal growth, self-acceptance, and positive relations with others) and social well-being (social

contribution and social coherence) of the participant pre-service teachers had an effect on their perceptions of positive classroom environment. This result can be explicated as follows: From the psychological point of view, the participants are open to new experiences, so they will most probably develop themselves continuously in their future careers; they have positive attitudes towards the self and their past lives, and this may help them develop their self-confidence and contentment in teaching; and they are expected to promote positive relations with their students, which may create a culture of trust and empathy in the classroom. From the social point of view, they believe that they have something valuable to give others, which may lead them to continuously share their knowledge and experiences with students; and they have an interest in students and the context, which may make them understand their students' needs and feelings, thus setting the goals accordingly.

Undoubtedly, teachers are expected to have all the traits of psychological and social well-being to develop a positive classroom environment. However, this was not observed in the participants of this study. The findings revealed, for example, that the participant pre-service teachers lacked appraisal of certain dimensions of social wellness such as social actualization, social acceptance and social integration. Acknowledging the fact that classrooms are indeed communities, a sense of belonging and social cohesion can be told to constitute the foundation for social well-being of this social structure. Therefore, the degree to which teachers feel that they belong to their communities, namely their students, and the extent to which the individual members of this community feel fondness for the other members are important indicators of social integration. The participant pre-service teachers' disagreement with the statements reflecting the above mentioned dimensions of social well-being signal a possibility of a social challenge that they might face when they start teaching. The responses of the participants regarding social actualization are no different. Drawing on the argument that healthier people are hopeful about the condition and future of society and can recognize society's potential (Keyes, 1998), the low level of the participant pre-service teachers at social actualization dimension of social well-being suggests another social challenge that might be faced during their profession. The results of this study clearly show that there is a need for raising the awareness of pre-service teachers with respect to different dimensions of well-being and its impact on positive functioning.

Then it is highly important that teacher education programs should integrate courses to promote pre-service teachers' well-being. Such integration may help them start their profession with a hope and motivation which drives their well-being and help them cope with the problems they encounter in their profession. Hope can be defined as "the belief that one can find pathways to desired goals and become motivated to use those pathways" (Snyder, Rand, and Sigmon, 2002, p. 257). Hope and optimism for future allow individuals and communities to flourish (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000; Vazques, Hervas, Rahona, & Gomez, 2009). Hopeful teachers, as Bullough and Hall-Kenyon (2012) mention, have a sense of calling and commitment to teaching, so they most likely make a positive difference in their

students' lives. Unfortunately, it would not be possible to state that the participants of this study were hopeful enough yet to fully function in their profession. The reason of this assumption relies on the findings related to one of the dimensions of psychological well-being, *Purpose in Life*, which is somewhat linked to this conception of hope. The descriptive analysis showed that the participants had a moderate level of purpose in life. That is, their intentions and goals for future were not yet clear. Besides, they did not perceive this particular dimension of well-being as having an effect on positive classroom environment. This study also indicated that the participants did not associate *Environmental Mastery*, the ability to develop in the world and change it creatively by engaging in physical or mental activities (Ryff, 1989), and *Autonomy*, a dimension related to self-determination, with positive classroom environment. Yet, all these indicators of psychological well-being have an effect on the quality of classroom environment as the level of psychological well-being directly influences the quality of one's work life (Al-Qutop & Harrim, 2011). Relevant literature proves that positive psychological well-being positively effects productivity (Rathi, 2009; Envick, 2012). For example, having sense of direction brings in return more job satisfaction and being free from tension, anxiety and boredom. Similarly, being competent in self-regulation allows an individual use their potential for the benefit of themselves and their organizations, which are the schools and the students in our case.

Keeping in mind that the participants of the study are not practicing teachers yet, we can only hope that they will develop these traits while teaching. However, there is ample research reporting just the opposite—teachers suffering from burnouts while teaching arisen from various factors: The belief that their effort is greater than the rewards (Pillay, Goddard, and Wilss, 2005), job demands such as workload, pupil misbehavior, or physical environment (Hakanen, Bakker, and Schaufeli, 2006), or some personal problems (Slegers, 1999). Therefore, pre-service teachers could be offered assistance to help them master issues and skills regarding improving and sustaining their well-being and thereby maintaining positive classroom environment. We suggest further research to focus on the effectiveness of such interventions that aim to increase candidate teachers' well-being levels and their effects on their perception of positive classroom environment. Also, although there is much research on teachers' perception of classroom environment, there is a need for more research to reveal relationships between classroom environment and teachers' overall feelings of well-being. Therefore, we believe, this study carries significance as an initial attempt exploring the relationship between teachers' perception of positive classroom environment and their psychological and social well-being within the context of language teacher education.

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