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The role of grade level in student evaluations of teaching evidence from a middle school context

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Abstract

This study aims to examine whether middle school students' evaluation scores regarding the instructional process significantly differ according to the variable of grade level. Within the scope of the research, student evaluations concerning the dimensions of teacher, content, materials, and learning environment were analyzed. The study was conducted using the relational survey model, and the study group consisted of 541 students enrolled in a public middle school in Turkey. The students were in 6th, 7th, and 8th grades. The Kruskal-Wallis H test was employed for data analysis. The findings revealed significant differences in the dimensions of teacher, content, learning environment, and overall score, while no significant difference was found in the material dimension. Notably, 8th-grade students tended to assign higher evaluation scores, whereas lower scores were observed in certain dimensions among 7th-grade students. The results indicate that students' perceptions of the instructional process vary according to their developmental levels, in alignment with the constructivist learning approach.

Introduction

Contemporary educational paradigms have moved away from viewing the instructional process as a mere transmission of knowledge. Instead, they have adopted approaches that emphasize students' active participation in learning and their right to evaluate the educational process. Particularly influenced by constructivist theory, student-centered instructional models advocate for learners to construct their own understanding and meaningfully assess their experiences within the instructional process (Brooks & Brooks, 1999). Within this framework, students' perceptions regarding teacher attitudes, content structure, learning environments, and the use of instructional materials are not only considered indicators of instructional quality but also serve as tools to evaluate the extent to which learning environments are student-centered.

Students' evaluations of the instructional process may be influenced by various individual and contextual factors. One such factor is grade level, which may lead to differences in students' cognitive development stages, accumulated pedagogical experiences, and the duration of interaction with teachers. Particularly at the middle school level, the variability of students' evaluations based on grade level aligns with the constructivist learning approach, which emphasizes the importance of individual differences (Schunk, 2012). In this context, students at different grade levels within the same school environment may perceive teacher interaction, course content, or the learning environment differently.

However, in Turkey, there is a limited number of studies that systematically compare middle school students' evaluations of the instructional process based on grade level. Existing research tends to focus on variables such as academic achievement, teacher attitudes, or the use of instructional materials, and does not offer explanatory findings regarding how students at different grade levels experience the instructional process. Yet, incorporating

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student perspectives into evaluation processes is a fundamental component in constructing democratic and participatory learning environments, as envisioned by contemporary educational theories (Tinto, 2012).

In this context, the present study aims to reveal how middle school students' evaluations of the instructional process differ according to grade level. It seeks to make both theoretical and practical contributions regarding how student-centered instructional designs are perceived by learners at various stages of development.

The Foundations of the Student-Centered Approach

The student-centered approach recognizes that students are not passive recipients in the learning process but rather active agents who construct knowledge and guide their own learning. Within this framework, learners are positioned as individuals who inquire, ask questions, make sense of information, and manage their own learning processes. The role of the teacher, therefore, shifts from being a transmitter of knowledge to serving as a facilitator and planner of the learning experience (Brooks & Brooks, 1999; Cornelius-White, 2007).

This perspective requires not only a transformation of classroom instruction but also a redefinition of how learning is assessed. In student-centered education, the quality of instruction is not determined solely by exam results or external standards, but also through feedback based on students' perceptions of their learning experiences. Taking student perspectives into account during the evaluation of instruction is a fundamental requirement of contemporary learning approaches (Alışır, Doğan, Yılmaz, & Çakır, 2022).

Within the framework of constructivist theory, this approach conceptualizes knowledge as a dynamic process that students construct and make meaningful through their prior knowledge, lived experiences, and interaction with their social environment (Schunk, 2012). In this context, a student's ability to evaluate the learning process and assess instruction should be regarded as an expression of their level of engagement and cognitive awareness.

From a classroom practice perspective, activities such as collaborative learning, peer interaction, and project-based work are widely recognized as fundamental implementations of the student-centered approach (Weimer, 2013). Through such practices, students are encouraged to take ownership of their learning and develop a deeper understanding of the instructional process.

However, for this approach to be implemented effectively, several structural and pedagogical conditions must be met. Teachers' pedagogical competencies should align with the principles of student-centered learning, school administrations must adopt an open-minded stance toward flexible practices, and existing educational policies should support participatory learning (Işık, Çiltaş, & Baş, 2010). When these and similar conditions are fulfilled, a student-centered instructional process can enhance not only students' academic achievement but also their commitment to the learning experience.

Constructivist Theory and the Role of the Student in Evaluation

Constructivist learning theory asserts that knowledge is not passively received from the outside but is actively constructed by the individual through the integration of prior knowledge, experiences, and interactions with their environment. According to Bada and Olusegun (2015), learning is not the result of memorized content, but rather the outcome of personally meaningful experiences. While Piaget's theory of cognitive constructivism emphasizes that learning occurs through individual mental processes, Vygotsky (1978) adopts a social constructivist perspective, arguing that learning takes place within social interaction and cultural contexts. Richardson (2003) posits that this theoretical foundation positions the student not merely as a recipient of knowledge, but as an active agent who directs the process and contributes to learning. Therefore, student evaluations play a critical role not only in identifying learning outcomes but also in assessing the quality of classroom interactions and instructional practices.

Theoretical Frameworks of Educational Evaluation

Educational evaluation should not be regarded solely as a tool for measuring students' academic achievement, but also as a means of monitoring, improving, and guiding the entire instructional process. In this context, evaluation theories offer various perspectives on what components of instruction should be evaluated, how, and for what purpose. For instance, Tyler (1949) associated evaluation with the degree to which instructional objectives are achieved and developed the objectives-based model of program evaluation. This approach emphasizes planning instruction according to predefined goals and measuring student achievement based on the outcomes of goal-oriented teaching.

In contrast, Scriven (1967) conceptualized evaluation not merely as an outcome-based measurement activity but as a process with ethical, contextual, and value-laden dimensions. He defined evaluation as a value-based activity, emphasizing the importance of "evaluation as valuing." From this broader perspective, an educational program should not only be evaluated in terms of its outcomes but also with regard to how and under what conditions it is implemented, and how it benefits the target group.

The CIPP Model (Context, Input, Process, Product), developed by Stufflebeam, brings a systematic and institutional structure to this perspective by examining the evaluation process through four distinct stages. The model encompasses not only the outcomes of programs but also the preparatory phase (context), the adequacy of resources (input), the effectiveness of implementation (process), and the final results (product) (Stufflebeam & Coryn, 2014). This multidimensional approach offers a robust framework for monitoring educational policies and enhancing instructional designs.

A common feature among these theories is their shared emphasis on the necessity of collecting information about instructional processes beyond merely quantitative outcomes. The inclusion of qualitative elements—such as student feedback, classroom interactions, and the overall learning environment—into the evaluation process is one of the fundamental requirements of contemporary educational paradigms.

The Role of Student Perspectives in the Evaluation Process

In traditional evaluation approaches, the quality of instruction was often determined based on students' academic performance. However, contemporary educational paradigms advocate for a broader and more valid evaluation process that incorporates students' perceptions and experiences of the instructional process (Marsh & Roche, 1993). This is due to the fact that students, as direct participants in the learning environment, are capable of providing data that reflect both cognitive and affective dimensions of instruction.

With the growing influence of constructivist and student-centered approaches, the notion that instruction should be evaluated not only from the perspective of the "instructor" but also from that of the "learner" has gained substantial ground. In this regard, student perspectives play a key role in identifying which practices support or hinder learning. Moreover, the systematic collection of student perceptions contributes to the redesign of instructional models and provides educators with feedback on the effectiveness of various instructional components (Tinto, 2012).

Research has shown that student evaluations do not merely reflect levels of satisfaction, but also enable a critical analysis of teaching processes (Richardson, 2005). Student experiences regarding elements such as classroom climate, instructional strategies, learning materials, and teacher attitudes yield valuable qualitative data about the overall quality of instruction. Therefore, student evaluations have become an indispensable component of educational quality enhancement, functioning as a continuous feedback mechanism.

The Relationship Between Constructivist Learning Theory and Grade Level

Constructivist learning theory posits that individuals are not passive recipients of knowledge but active constructors of meaning. At the core of this theory lie Jean Piaget's cognitive constructivism and Lev Vygotsky's social constructivism. Piaget argued that individuals learn by relating new information to their prior experiences in accordance with their stages of cognitive development, whereas Vygotsky emphasized that learning is shaped through social interaction and that the learner's engagement within the social environment plays a crucial role in this process (Schunk, 2012).

These theoretical foundations suggest that students' evaluations of the learning process may vary depending on their age, cognitive level, and experiences of social interaction. Particularly during transitional developmental periods such as middle school, students' perceptions of teacher attitudes, content structure, or the learning environment may differ according to grade level. Therefore, taking grade level into account in the evaluation of instructional processes emerges not only as a pedagogical consideration but also as a developmental necessity.

Developmental and Pedagogical Perspectives

The variation in students' evaluations of instructional processes across different grade levels can be elucidated through developmental and pedagogical lenses. Jean Piaget's theory of cognitive development posits that children progress through distinct stages, culminating in the formal operational stage around the age of 11. During this stage, individuals acquire the capacity for abstract reasoning, hypothesis formulation, and systematic problem-solving

(Piaget, 1972). This cognitive maturation enables students to engage in more profound analysis and evaluation of instructional content.

Lev Vygotsky's sociocultural theory emphasizes that learning transpires within social contexts and is mediated by cultural tools and interactions. According to Vygotsky, cognitive development is significantly influenced by social interactions and the internalization of cultural norms (Vygotsky, 1978). As students advance in grade levels, their exposure to diverse social interactions and learning experiences expands, potentially enhancing their capacity for critical evaluation of instructional methodologies.

From a pedagogical standpoint, the constructivist learning approach asserts that learners actively construct new knowledge by integrating it with their existing cognitive frameworks. This approach advocates for active student participation and the cultivation of critical thinking skills. As students progress through educational stages, the accumulation of prior learning experiences facilitates a more nuanced and in-depth assessment of the learning environment (Brooks & Brooks, 1993).

This theoretical framework aligns with empirical findings indicating that 8th-grade students tend to assign higher evaluation scores to instructional processes, suggesting an increase in cognitive and pedagogical maturity. Such observations underscore the importance of considering developmental and pedagogical factors when evaluating instructional methodologies.

Pedagogical Differentiation According to Grade Level

Grade level is a significant variable that influences students' pedagogical experiences, learning habits, and perceptions of the instructional environment. Particularly at the middle school level, notable differences are observed in terms of cognitive, affective, and social development, and these differences are reflected in students' evaluations of the learning environment. Students' interactions with teachers, their perceptions of instructional content, and their levels of satisfaction with the learning environment may vary depending on their grade level. Research indicates that students in higher grades tend to develop more systematic and evaluative perceptions of instructional processes (Meece, Glienke, & Burg, 2006).

Therefore, evaluating instructional processes by grade level should not be viewed merely as a quantitative comparison, but rather as a pedagogical necessity aimed at enhancing instructional sensitivity. This perspective aligns with the constructivist principle of focusing on the "learner's condition," and contributes to the advancement of equity and inclusivity in education.

Rationale and Purpose of the Study

Students' experiences regarding the instructional process serve as a vital source of feedback—not only for understanding learning outcomes but also for evaluating the quality of the instructional environment and the effectiveness of pedagogical practices. In contemporary educational approaches, the instructional process is evaluated in conjunction with students' active participation, capacity for interaction, and ability to engage in self-assessment related to learning (Entwistle, 2009). In this context, students' evaluations of teacher attitudes, course content, learning environments, and instructional materials are considered key indicators of the overall quality of instruction.

Constructivist theory and student-centered instructional models, in particular, require that the learning process be addressed with attention to individual, contextual, and developmental dimensions. According to these approaches, how a student perceives the instructional process is directly related to their age, cognitive level, and prior educational experiences (Bransford, Brown, & Cocking, 2000). Therefore, students' evaluations of the instructional process are not fixed or homogeneous; rather, they vary depending on developmental stages, pedagogical background, and grade level.

Grade level is one of the primary variables that shapes a student's duration of exposure to instructional settings, the intensity of interaction with teachers, and their self-efficacy beliefs regarding learning (Zimmerman, 2002). As students advance to higher grades, they not only accumulate more knowledge but also tend to evaluate the learning environment in a more holistic and reflective manner. Indeed, theories of developmental psychology and learning emphasize that students' ways of evaluating learning environments and instructional processes evolve alongside age and cognitive maturity (Eccles & Roeser, 2011). This developmental progression suggests that students' feedback on the instructional process may exhibit significant variations based on grade level.

However, a review of studies conducted in Turkey reveals that research systematically comparing students' evaluations of the instructional process based on grade level is quite limited. Existing studies tend to focus on variables such as teacher qualifications, use of instructional materials, or academic achievement, and do not provide findings that explain how students construct their instructional experiences according to grade level (Demirtaş & Cömert, 2007). Yet, incorporating student perspectives into the evaluation process is of great importance not only for enhancing the quality of instruction but also for developing age-sensitive educational policies.

In this regard, identifying whether students' evaluation scores of the instructional process differ significantly by grade level has the potential to address a critical gap in both theoretical and practical educational research.

The purpose of this study is to examine whether middle school students' evaluation scores regarding the instructional process differ significantly according to grade level. Within the scope of the research, students' perceptions were assessed across four dimensions: teacher, content, materials, and learning environment. These evaluations were analyzed to determine whether significant differences exist among 6th, 7th, and 8th grade students.

The findings are expected to contribute to understanding how students at different grade levels experience instructional processes and to offer insights for instructional design and practice by revealing how student-centered approaches are developmentally perceived.

The sub-problems of the study are listed below:

- Do middle school students' overall evaluation scores regarding the instructional process differ significantly according to grade level?
- Do middle school students' evaluation scores related to the teacher dimension differ significantly according to grade level?
- Do middle school students' evaluation scores related to the content dimension differ significantly according to grade level?
- Do middle school students' evaluation scores related to the material dimension differ significantly according to grade level?
- Do middle school students' evaluation scores related to the learning environment dimension differ significantly according to grade level?

Method

This section presents the research design, study group, data collection tools, and data analysis procedures employed in the study.

Research Design

This study is a quantitative comparative research conducted within the scope of the relational survey model. The relational survey model is a research design that aims to reveal the existing relationships between variables and to examine whether there are statistically significant differences among groups (Karasar, 2012). In this study, middle school students' evaluations of the instructional process were analyzed by comparing them in relation to the variable of grade level.

Participants

The study group consisted of a total of 541 students enrolled in a public middle school located in Adana, Turkey, during the spring semester of the 2024–2025 academic year. Participants were identified after excluding individuals whose responses were identified as outliers during the data collection process.

The study group included 67 sixth-grade, 211 seventh-grade, and 263 eighth-grade students. The participants were selected using the convenience sampling method, which is one of the purposive sampling techniques. This sampling method includes student groups that the researcher can access and from whom data can be collected efficiently, thereby enabling comparisons based on grade level at the middle school stage. Demographic variables such as gender and age were excluded from the scope of the study; instead, grade level was used as the sole focus variable.

Data Collection

To collect data for this study, the "Instructional Evaluation Scale for Middle School Students," developed by Kırmızıoğlu (2025), was used. The scale consists of four sub-dimensions—teacher, content, materials, and learning environment—and includes a total of 39 items. Participants responded to the scale items using a five-point Likert-type rating system (1 = Strongly Disagree, 5 = Strongly Agree).

The internal consistency of the scale has been reported as high in previous studies, with a Cronbach's alpha coefficient of $\alpha = .93$. For the current research, validity and reliability checks were also conducted on the data obtained through the scale.

Data Analysis

The data obtained within the scope of the research were analyzed using the SPSS 25.0 statistical software package. Outlier analysis was performed on the total scores and sub-dimension scores obtained from the scale. Values with $|z| > 3.29$ were considered outliers and excluded from the dataset. All analyses were conducted on the remaining dataset consisting of 541 students. The normality of the distribution of data across grade levels was examined using the Shapiro-Wilk test. Since the data were found not to be normally distributed, the Kruskal-Wallis H test was employed to determine whether there were statistically significant differences in instructional evaluation scores based on grade level. The level of statistical significance for the study was set at $p < .05$.

Results

In this study, it was examined whether students' evaluation scores regarding the instructional process differed according to grade level. Student responses were evaluated across five dimensions: teacher, content, materials, learning environment, and overall score. After removing outliers, the data were subjected to analysis.

The mean instructional evaluation scores by grade level are presented in Table 1.

Table 1.
Mean Evaluation Scores of Students by Grade Level.

Grade Level	Teacher	Content	Materials	Learning Environment	Overall Score
6th Grade	3.99	3.82	3.64	3.60	3.76
7th Grade	3.93	3.81	3.76	3.31	3.70
8th Grade	4.20	4.00	3.82	3.66	3.92

According to Table 1, 8th-grade students reported the highest evaluation scores across all sub-dimensions as well as in the overall score. This difference is particularly pronounced in the teacher and content dimensions. 7th-grade students had the lowest mean score in the learning environment dimension. In the materials dimension, the differences between grade levels were minimal and statistically insignificant.

Since the data did not show a normal distribution, the Kruskal-Wallis H test was used for comparisons. The results obtained from the analysis are presented in Table 2.

Table 2.
Kruskal-Wallis Test Results for Instructional Evaluation Scores by Grade Level

Dimension	H Value	p Value	Significance (p<.05)
Teacher	32.579	.000	Significant
Content	11.661	.002	Significant
Material	2.603	.272	Not Significant
Learning Environment	16.340	.000	Significant
Overall Score	17.660	.000	Significant

According to the results of the analysis, students' evaluation scores in the teacher, content, learning environment, and overall dimensions differ statistically significantly based on their grade level. In contrast, no significant difference was found between grade levels in the materials dimension ($p > .05$). These findings indicate that students' perceptions of the instructional process tend to become more positive as grade level increases. Moreover, the differences are more pronounced in interaction-based dimensions such as teacher and learning environment, suggesting a developmental shift in how students evaluate instructional components.

Discussion, Conclusion & Suggestions

In this study, it was found that middle school students' instructional evaluation scores differed significantly according to grade level. The observed differences—particularly in the teacher, content, learning environment, and overall score dimensions—indicate that students tend to provide more favorable evaluations of instructional processes as their grade level increases. The fact that 8th-grade students gave the highest scores across all dimensions may be attributed to their increased pedagogical maturity and their enhanced ability to consciously analyze the instructional process (Piaget, 1972).

This finding aligns with the core assumptions of the constructivist learning approach, which posits that individuals actively construct meaning by integrating new knowledge with prior experiences. In this context, the accumulation of previous learning experiences as students advance in grade level may enable them to evaluate the instructional environment in a more nuanced and reflective manner (Sarıtaş & Kılınç, 2020). Similarly, in a study on learning styles, Karamustafaoğlu et al. (2016) reported that as grade level increases, students' awareness of learning processes improves, and their evaluative capacities become more diverse.

The findings of the study revealed that there were significant differences in the teacher dimension. This result is consistent with the findings of Aslan and Kılıç (2020), who reported that students in higher grade levels found teacher behaviors more effective and evaluated them more consciously. This suggests that teacher–student interaction becomes more selective and cognitively meaningful as students grow older.

The higher scores given by 8th-grade students in more abstract dimensions such as content and learning environment indicate that students' perceptions of learning evolve beyond surface-level satisfaction toward content-based evaluation and cognitive interpretation. This finding aligns with the constructivist theory's emphasis on the individual's active construction of meaning (Schunk, 2012).

Another key finding of the study is the lack of a significant difference in the materials dimension. This may suggest that the instructional materials used do not vary substantially across grade levels or that they do not create a distinguishable impact from the students' perspective. Similarly, in the study conducted by Koray et al. (2020), which examined students' evaluation experiences, although differences were observed in certain dimensions across grade levels, students' evaluations of materials and content tended to remain relatively stable.

Overall, the findings of this study indicate that students' tendencies to evaluate the instructional process are sensitive to grade level and are influenced by developmental, pedagogical, and contextual factors. Considering Scriven's (1967) contextual evaluation approach and Stufflebeam's (2014) CIPP model, which emphasizes process-based evaluation, it becomes evident that instructional processes should be assessed not only on an individual basis but also within a developmental context. Particularly in the later years of middle school, students' evaluations of the instructional process appear to become more consistent, meaningful, and constructive.

This study examined whether middle school students' evaluation scores of the instructional process differed significantly according to grade level. The research was grounded in the assumption that in instructional environments designed according to student-centered and constructivist theories, individuals' perceptions of the learning process may vary depending on their cognitive and developmental levels.

The analyses revealed that students' scores in the teacher, content, learning environment, and overall evaluation dimensions differed significantly by grade level, whereas no statistically significant difference was found in the materials dimension.

The highest evaluation scores were given by 8th-grade students. This group provided more favorable evaluations than other grade levels, particularly in the teacher (4.20), content (4.00), and overall score (3.92) dimensions. These findings suggest that as students progress through grade levels, their instructional experiences increase, their pedagogical awareness develops, and their ability to evaluate instructional processes becomes more holistic. The absence of significant differences in the materials dimension may be attributed either to the lack of systematic differentiation in material use across grade levels or to students' perception that instructional materials are not a central element of the instructional process.

Based on these results, the following recommendations are offered:

Suggestions for Practitioners

Designing instructional environments that are flexible and developmentally appropriate for different grade levels can contribute to students experiencing the instructional process in a more meaningful way. Since students' perceptions of teacher interaction and instructional content vary by grade level, it is important for teachers to pay greater attention to using instructional language, methods, and materials that are suitable for the specific grade level they are teaching.

The relatively low scores observed among 7th-grade students in the learning environment dimension suggest that students at this level may be more sensitive to environmental factors such as classroom relationships, order, and participation. Therefore, it is recommended that classroom management practices be improved and adapted to better meet the needs of this group.

Suggestions for Future Research

To gain a deeper understanding of the reasons behind the differences observed across grade levels, future studies may employ mixed-method designs supported by qualitative research techniques such as student interviews and classroom observations.

Since this study was conducted solely at the middle school level, similar measurements can be carried out at different educational stages (elementary, high school, and university) to trace the developmental trajectory of perception changes across grade levels.

In addition to grade level, future research may explore the influence of other variables—such as socioeconomic status, school type, and academic achievement—on students' evaluations of the instructional process.

In conclusion, this study demonstrates that student perceptions are shaped not only by individual characteristics but also by developmental and contextual variables such as grade level. In alignment with student-centered and constructivist instructional approaches, making evaluation processes sensitive to students' age and grade level may help yield more inclusive and meaningful feedback.Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The authors declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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Ethical Considerations

This study was conducted in accordance with the ethical approval obtained from the Ethics Committee of Çukurova University (Decision No: 10, dated 02.11.2023). The identities of the students and the institution were kept confidential, and all data were used solely for scientific purposes. Participants were informed in line with the principles of voluntary participation, and ethical standards were rigorously observed throughout their involvement in the research.

In the process of translating the article into English, assistance was obtained from the AI-based language model ChatGPT (OpenAI, 2025). The model was utilized solely for linguistic support and did not contribute to the content, interpretation, or conclusions of the study. The author assumes full responsibility for the accuracy and integrity of the translated text.

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