Selective Students' Views of the Essential Characteristics of Effective Teachers

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Abstract

This paper reports on the first phase of a study investigating the qualities of effective teachers from the perspective of gifted students. A questionnaire was administered to students in Years 7, 9 and 11 at an academically selective high school in New South Wales, Australia. The data demonstrated that the personal-social qualities of the teachers were more highly valued than their intellectual qualities although there was a shift between Year 7 and Year 11 toward the intellectual end of the continuum. Overall there were no gender differences but in Year 9, girls favored the teacher's personal characteristics more than their male counterparts. The open-ended questions, however, demonstrated that the characteristics (personal-social vs intellectual) cannot be neatly dichotomised. Recommendations are made for teacher training.

Introduction

There would be little argument that the key to the success of any educational program is the teacher. Renzulli's (1968) survey of twenty-one experts in gifted education, for example, determined that the most important element in the success of programs for gifted students was the teacher. Most teacher training programs, today, include statements of the competencies, attributes or qualities that their graduates will gain through the course of their training. Such statements tend to be generic and usually fail to address the needs of specific groups of students. In Australia, for example, scant attention is given to the needs of gifted students in undergraduate teacher training courses. While there are mandates for study in other special education areas, the amount of time devoted to gifted education is dependent solely on the orientations of individuals within the training institutions. The assumption seems to be that the attributes of a good teacher are the same for all students. For gifted education, the question remains as to whether the qualities that make a teacher effective are the same for gifted students as they are for those who are not gifted.

Teacher Characteristics and Behaviors

In 1980, Renzulli suggested that it is counter-productive to focus on teacher characteristics; instead, he argued, the focus should be on teacher behaviors. An analysis of the literature into qualities of the effective teacher of gifted students demonstrates that while different nomenclature is used by the various researchers, their conclusions inevitably incorporate a complex combination of personality characteristics, knowledge and skills, professional attitudes, and teaching approaches and strategies.

The writers who have researched and subsequently listed the characteristics that are essential or highly desirable in effective teachers of the gifted have drawn on a variety of sources including gifted education experts, teachers, students, and/or parents. A synthesis of their conclusions reveals a number of characteristics (see Table 1 for summary) as recurring themes. These themes can be grouped along three dimensions relating to the teachers' knowledge and skills; their teaching and classroom management style; and their interpersonal qualities.

Table 1

Characteristics of Effective Teachers of the Gifted

Characteristic	Source
has insights into the cognitive, social and emotional needs of gifted students	Bishop, 1980; Burg, 1988; Davalos & Griffin, 1999; Feldhusen, 1991; Hansen & Feldhusen, 1994; Nelson & Prindle, 1992; Whitlock & DuCette, 1989
has skills in differentiating the curriculum for gifted students	Feldhusen, 1991; Nelson & Prindle, 1992; Whitlock & DuCette, 1989
employs strategies that encourage higher level thinking	Feldhusen, 1991; Hansen & Feldhusen, 1994; Nelson & Prindle, 1992
encourages students to be independent learners	Feldhusen, 1991; Goertz & Phemister, 1994; Hansen & Feldhusen, 1994; Nelson & Prindle, 1992; Whitlock & DuCette, 1989
provides student-centered learning opportunities	Bishop, 1980; Davalos & Griffin, 1999
acts as a facilitator or "guide on the side"	Bernal, 1994; Whitlock & DuCette, 1989
creates a non-threatening learning environment	Hansen & Feldhusen, 1994
is well organized	Bishop, 1980; Feldhusen, 1991; Maddux, Samples-Lachmann & Cummings, 1985
possesses in-depth knowledge of subject matter	Bishop, 1980; Burg, 1988; Emerick, 1992; Feldhusen, 1991; Lewis, 1982; Goertz & Phemister, 1994; Maddux et al., 1985; Milgram, 1979
has broad interests, often literary and cultural	Bishop, 1980
has above average intelligence	Bishop, 1980; Feldhusen, 1991; Lewis, 1982; Milgram, 1979
is a lifelong learner	Bernal, 1994; Emerick, 1992
thinks creatively	Bishop, 1980; Lewis, 1982; Hansen & Feldhusen, 1994; Maddux et al., 1985; Milgram, 1979; Nelson & Prindle, 1992

possesses excellent communication skills	Bishop, 1980; Lewis, 1982
is willing to make mistakes	Bernal, 1994; Whitlock & DuCette, 1989
possesses a sense of humor	Bernal, 1994; Burg, 1988; Goertz & Phemister, 1994; Maddux et al., 1985
is enthusiastic	Feldhusen, 1991; Goertz & Phemister, 1994; Hansen & Feldhusen, 1994; Whitlock & DuCette, 1989

Student Perceptions of Desirable Teacher Characteristics

While policy and curriculum documents extol the desirable and essential qualities of good teachers of gifted students, relatively few research studies have utilized the views of gifted students themselves. In a seminal study, Bishop (1976) examined the characteristics of US high school teachers regarded as successful by their gifted, high achieving students. He found that a combination of intellectual and personal characteristics was highly regarded by the students. In brief, Bishop concluded that the following characterized successful teachers:

- maturity and experience
- intellectual superiority
- high achievement orientation
- commitment to intellectual growth
- favorable attitude toward students
- orderly and systematic approach
- imagination
- engagement in intellectual pursuits

Other studies conducted in the US have pointed to a preference by gifted students for the personal characteristics over the intellectual qualities of their teachers. For example, Lewis (1982) worked with small groups of gifted students in grades three through seven in the US to identify the characteristics of successful teachers of the gifted. The students agreed on a list of 22 essential characteristics, the most important of which included creativity, understanding, patience and honesty. The majority of items listed related to the personal qualities of the teacher.

Abel and Karnes (1994) used the Preferred Instructor Characteristics Scale (PICS) (Krumboltz & Farquhar, 1957) with 49 gifted students from rural, lower socioeconomic background and 49 gifted students from suburban, advantaged backgrounds in the US. They found that the students strongly preferred the personal-social characteristics of their teachers.

Dorhout (1983) also used the Preferred Instructor Characteristics Scale (Krumboltz & Farquhar, 1957) with his study of 279 gifted students drawn from grades five to twelve and 110 of their teachers in the US. Dorhout compared the students' preferences with those anticipated by their teachers. The students preferred the personal-social characteristics of their teachers; secondary teachers believed that students would respond more closely to the intellectual-cognitive end of the continuum. The researcher concluded that secondary teachers need to be more aware of their students' preferences if they are to adequately respond to their needs.

In stark contrast to the findings of these US studies, are the findings reported by Milgram in her study of Israeli children. Milgram (1979) studied 459 gifted and non-gifted students in grades four through six in Israel. One of the instruments used was a self-designed survey called the Student Perception of Teachers Scale (SPOT). Like the PICS, this instrument sought students' preferences for the personal and intellectual qualities of their teachers but Milgram also added the dimension of teacher creativity. This final category relates to the teachers' approaches to classroom organisation, presentation of material and so on. Milgram's subjects demonstrated a strong preference for the intellectual qualities of the teacher above the other two dimensions.

Maddux, Samples-Lachmann & Cummings (1985) used an American version of the SPOT with gifted junior high school students. Unlike Milgram, they found that their students preferred the personal-social characteristics of their teachers over the intellectual and "creativity" characteristics.

Teachers of the Gifted: Relevant Australian Research

Like other parts of the world, there has been comparatively little Australian research into the qualities of effective teachers of gifted students. Most research related to teachers and the gifted in Australia has focussed on teachers' attitudes toward, and understanding of, gifted students. Whitton's (1997) study of the practices of 606 primary school teachers in New South Wales, for example, found that these teachers demonstrated a lack of knowledge about gifted children and made only minor modifications to their curriculum. Similarly, McKinnon's (1998) study of early childhood teachers found that they had little awareness of the nature and needs of gifted students and were unable to differentiate the curriculum for such students. This finding was consistent across the research sample despite differences in the age and experience of the teachers. The younger the gifted children, the less likely that their needs would be recognized and met by classroom teachers, according to Wellisch (1997).

In a modified replication of Tannenbaum's (1962) research, Carrington (Carrington & Bailey, 2000) examined the attitudes of preservice teachers toward gifted students. He found that preservice teachers were significantly more positive toward gifted students who were not studious compared to those who were. Although less significant, he also found that gifted girls were less well regarded than gifted boys by preservice teachers.

The importance of changing teacher attitudes to gifted students through training in the field was clearly demonstrated by Gross's (1994) study. Gross reported strong positive shifts in the attitudes of inservice teachers, undertaking a course in gifted education, toward gifted children. Similar conclusions linking teacher training and positive teacher attitudes were drawn by Wellisch (1997) and Whitton (1997).

While it may be possible to extrapolate some of the desirable qualities of teachers of gifted students from these studies, a more complete picture may be gained by exploring the attitudes of gifted students to their teachers. In an exploratory study, Vialle (1998)

questioned primary school students (Years 5 and 6) enrolled in a gifted program. In semi-structured interviews, the students were asked to describe the qualities that make a good teacher. The findings from these interviews clearly demonstrated that personal qualities were as highly regarded as academic qualities, a finding that is reminiscent of the study conducted by Abel and Karnes (1994). The students in Vialle's study rated understanding and helpfulness as the key qualities in their ideal teacher. Although their teachers needed to be smart according to 15% of the students, the ability to facilitate their learning through setting challenging tasks was described as a key factor by a large majority of the sample. A sense of humor, creativity and curiosity were also qualities in their teachers that were highly valued by the students. Finally, the students required their teachers to make the work interesting and to be well organized.

Method

Context

In New South Wales, Australia, academically selective schools were established to provide an appropriate learning environment for high school students of above-average ability. The students gain entry by undertaking a standardized entrance test, similar to an IQ test. There are currently 19 such schools in the state among a total of 391 government high schools. While students are required to qualify to attend a selective school, there has been no compulsion for teachers in these schools to have any training whatsoever in gifted education. As a result, it is not uncommon for teachers with little insights into the specific needs of gifted students to be responsible for their education. Given that the teacher is one of the most important elements in an effective education for all students (Ramsey, 2000; Renzulli, 1968), the question arises as to how students in these selective schools regard the quality of their teachers.

This project aimed, therefore, to identify the qualities of good teachers from the perspective of students at a selective high school. The students were asked to identify qualities related to their teachers' academic abilities, personalities, and teaching styles/approaches. This initial phase of the project was designed to form a baseline position on which future research would be built. The ultimate aim of the research is to understand what qualities and behaviors are needed for effective teachers of gifted students and whether gifted students differ from mainstream students in their preferences.

Subjects

The research was conducted in an academically selective high school located in Sydney, New South Wales. Students qualify for entry into the school through their results on the Selective Schools Entrance Test (similar to an IQ test). Not all students would qualify as gifted according to most IQ definitions but they would all be regarded as above average students in ability.

A total of 387 students from Years 7, 9 and 11 participated in the study.

Instrument

The Preferred Instructor Characteristics Scale, created by Krumboltz and Farquhar (1957), was used for a number of reasons. First, the survey was intended as a means by which to gain preliminary data on selective students' preferences. Given that two US studies have also used this instrument with samples of gifted students, it was believed that use of the same instrument would provide a basis for some comparison of Australian students with their international counterparts. The SPOT (Milgram, 1979) was translated into English but

required too much modification to make comparisons valid. The Maddux et al. (1985) version of the SPOT was unavailable.

The PICS is a forced-choice, 36-item questionnaire that seeks to identify whether the academic or personality characteristics of teachers are more important to the students. Each item requires the students to select either a personal-social attribute or a cognitive-intellectual attribute. An example is:

I prefer a teacher who:

1. q is an expert.

q treats us as mature people.

Krumboltz and Farquhar (1957) reported a test-retest reliability coefficient of .88 for the PICS and of .90 when the Hoyt's Analysis of variance technique was utilised. Validity was established through correlations with established measures of study habits and attitudes.

Three open-ended questions were added to the PICS to gather additional information that would augment the PICS results. In these questions, the students were asked to describe the qualities of good teachers, effective teachers and ineffective teachers respectively.

Procedure

The questionnaire was administered to the students in separate year groups. Students were also requested to indicate their gender. The survey results from the PICS were entered into SPSS and means and standard deviations were calculated for males and females, for individual year groups and for the total sample. Further, t-tests for independent samples were conducted to determine whether the differences in means were significant for overall gender, gender within grade, and between grades. The open-ended questions were coded for dominant themes.

Results and Discussion

The complete breakdown of means and standard deviations for our study appears in table 2. We have considered the dimensions of gender and grade level to see if any differences exist among these groups. We would like to have included ability level as well but because of the anonymity of the survey were unable to do so.

One trend that may be observed from a comparison of the grade means is that as students progress through high school, they come to appreciate the intellectual characteristics of their teachers more. There was a statistically significant result between the Year 7 and Year 11 sample (t = 4.453, df = 256,p > .000). This is not really surprising given that Year 11 students are about to embark on their final high school examinations. Females generally have a higher preference for the personal-social characteristics than do the male respondents (see Figure 1). However, the only statistically significant differences for gender were within the Grade 9 sample (t = 1.966, df = 117, p > .05). This finding needs to be treated with some caution because the sample sizes were uneven because the Year 9 football team was absent when the survey was administered. Despite the patterns noted above, the means all still remain firmly within the personal-social end of the continuum.

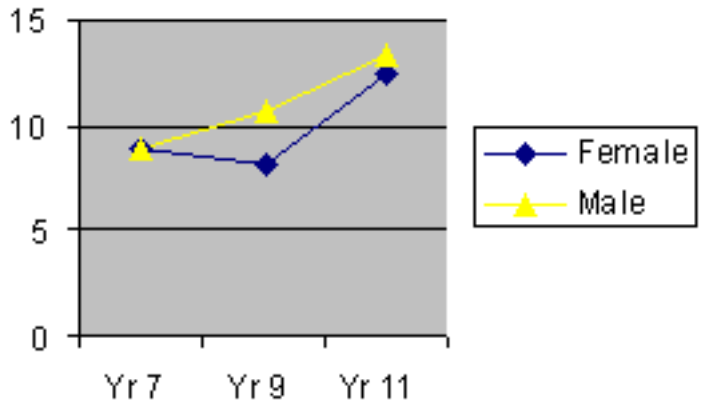

Figure 1. Gender and grade means

Table 2

Means and Standard Deviations of Selective High School Students

Group	N	Mean	SD
All	387	10.27	7.36
Female	197	9.54	7.00
Male	181	11.07	7.70
Year 7	141	8.92	6.90
Year 9	123	9.05	7.07
Year 11	123	13.02	7.44
Year 7 Female	70	8.98	7.39
Year 7 Male	67	8.92	6.54
Year 9 Female	75	8.08	5.87
Year 9 Male	44	10.70	8.66
Year 11 Female	52	12.40	7.26
Year 11 Male	70	13.34	7.56

The results of our preliminary survey with NSW selective high school students supported the findings of the Abel and Karnes (1994) research and Dorhout's (1983) study wherein students preferred the personal-social characteristics of their teachers to their intellectual-cognitive factors (see Table 3).

Table 3

A Comparison of Means and Standard Deviations Across Three Studies

Study	Group	Means	Standard Deviations
Abel & Karnes (1994)	Junior high (n=51) Senior high (n=44)	4.50 4.11	5.02 5.12
Dorhout (1983)	Secondary students	8.16	8.11
Vialle & Quigley (2000)	Secondary students (n=387)	10.27	7.36

Open-ended Questions:

The following responses represent students' answers to the open-ended questions. For the purpose of initial analysis, we have examined the responses of students who were at one end or the other of the continuum (that is, those students whose responses scored 0, 1 or 2 and those who scored from 34 to 36).

A score of 0, 1 or 2 represents a high preference for personal-social attributes (n=66). Some of the typical responses of these students included:

> *Someone who is friendly, open-minded and easy to talk to.* (Year 7 Female)
>
> *A person that makes a good teacher is one that listens to what the students have to say.* (Year 7 Male)
>
> *They have a good way of telling you what you need to know and make learning fun.* (Year 7 Male)
>
> *...has a sense of humour.* (Year 7 Male)
>
> *A good teacher is one that understands the students...* (Year 7 Male)
>
> *A good teacher puts the students first, makes the classroom a happy environment, yet still covers all of the curriculum....fair; objective....treat us with respect.* (Year 9 Female)

Gets us involved (Year 9 Female)

An interesting and different approach to the subjects covered (Year 9 Female)

Good communication skills (Year 9 Female)

They need to consider their pupils' emotions and feelings, and make the mood of the classroom a pleasant one, where everyone feels comfortable (Year 9 Female)

A good [teacher] is like a good coach of a football team. A good coach knows the players in his/her team and their capabilities. The coach encourages his team and supports the players. He is the team's role model and that makes the team get to know him. (Year 9 Male)

A teacher that caters for the smartest through to the least smart in every class (Year 11 Male)

A teacher should be dedicated to his students (Year 11 Male)

Despite the fact that these students' comments emphasised personal and social attributes, there were several comments that also touched on the teacher's intellectual qualities. These references to intellectual qualities were usually combined with statements regarding personal and social qualities, thereby indicating the complexity of the dynamics involved in effective teaching. Overall, the notion of learning and "covering the curriculum" were important to these students. Some interesting comments included:

A good teacher by my terms is one who knows his/her subject and brings it across to the students in various ways so it is effective and absorbed. (Year 9 Female)

I think understanding makes a good teacher. A teacher that understands where we're coming from and treats us all individually. Also, a teacher that actually has a background in the subject and maybe even likes the subject. Not a boring teacher that just reads from the textbook and has no enthusiasm.(Year 9 Male)

Someone who knows what they're talking about and has the experience, but doesn't act like they are higher than you (Year 11 Female)

Is interested in the subject they teach because it really shows through when they are teaching (Year 9 Female)

Some of the recurring ideas related to the qualities of an ineffective teacher were: boring, too strict (or too lax), criticising or ridiculing students, expecting too much and giving too much homework, shouting, disorganised, not interested in their students.

A score of 34 to 36 represents a high preference for intellectual-cognitive attributes. Only four students scored at this end of the continuum. The most insightful comment to me was from a Year 11 male who had scrawled on the side of the survey, "I could be in physics now happily learning the wonders of magnetism. Why am I doing this?" Other comments included the following:

> *A good teacher knows what we are being taught, and explains it well. It is good to have a teacher who is friendly towards us and will speak about things other than the work - but this has nothing to do with our education. Too many times have the last set of questions and sections of the subject been rushed and left somewhat incomplete because time was wasted with activities meant to make the class 'pleasant'. A teacher who focuses on the topic and can explain things in greater detail, wasting no time on making things pleasant will produce better students.* (Year 9 Male)
>
> *An effective teacher presents info in a way that challenges my brain and inspires me to learn more.* (Year 11 Male)
>
> *A strict teacher, with a core of understanding, expecting a high input and output from their students. Must also be encouraging.* (Year 11 Female)

In responding to the question about ineffective teachers, these students all agreed that teachers who were too friendly encouraged their students to slacken off.

Conclusion

Although this research is still in its preliminary stages, the survey results demonstrate that the personal characteristics of teachers are highly regarded by selective high school students. This finding is in accord with several US studies that also found a preference for the personal-social characteristics of teachers among gifted students. Nevertheless, an analysis of the open-ended data gathered in the current study reveal that this conclusion may be too simplistic and that the judgements made by students regarding teachers' personal qualities are inextricably linked with the teachers' intellectual characteristics and their teaching strategies.

Our preliminary findings reinforce the need for teachers to be adequately prepared for teaching gifted students. We would suggest that the training of gifted teachers needs to be mindful not only of the characteristics of gifted students but also of the complex mix of intellectual skills and knowledge of appropriate teaching strategies that teachers of gifted students require. Further, the selection of teachers for gifted students should be cognisant of the need for such teachers to have extensive discipline knowledge but, above all, an enthusiasm for the subjects-and students-they teach.

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