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Kornelia Tischler
University of Klagenfurt

Wilhelmina J. Vialle
University of Wollongong, wvialle@uow.edu.au

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GIFTED STUDENTS' PERCEPTIONS OF THE CHARACTERISTICS OF EFFECTIVE TEACHERS*

Wilma Vialle[1] and Kornelia Tischler[2]
[1] Faculty of Education, University of Wollongong, Wollongong, New South Wales, Australia
[2] Department of Education, University of Klagenfurt, Klagenfurt, Austria

Introduction

Are effective teachers born or can they be made? Are the qualities required to be an effective teacher the same for all students or do gifted students look for different things in their teachers? Do teachers of gifted learners need to be gifted themselves if they are to be effective? These questions prompted our investigation of the qualities of effective teachers of gifted students. An examination of the research literature revealed a number of key characteristics associated with teachers of the gifted, which we have classified into three areas: personal-social characteristics, teaching strategies and approaches, and intellectual characteristics (see Table 1).

Table 1
Characteristics of Effective Teachers of the Gifted

Personal-Social Characteristic	***Source***
has insights into the cognitive, social and emotional needs of gifted students	Bishop, 1980; Burg, 1988; Davalos & Griffin, 1999; Feldhusen, 1991; Goodnough, 2001; Hansen & Feldhusen, 1994; Landvogt, 2001; Nelson & Prindle, 1992; Whitlock & DuCette, 1989
possesses a sense of humour	Bernal, 1994; Burg, 1988; Goertz & Phemister, 1994; Maddux et al., 1985
is willing to make mistakes	Bernal, 1994; Whitlock & DuCette, 1989
is enthusiastic	Feldhusen, 1991; Goertz & Phemister, 1994; Hansen & Feldhusen, 1994; Whitlock & DuCette, 1989
is culturally responsive	Baldwin, et al., 2000; Chan, 2001; Ford & Trotman, 2001

Teaching Strategies/Approach	***Source***
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-centred learning	Bishop, 1980; Davalos & Griffin, 1999;

* An earlier version of this chapter was presented at the ECHA conference in 2006

opportunities	Kitano & Landry, 2001
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 organised	Bishop, 1980; Feldhusen, 1991; Maddux, et al., 1985

Intellectual-Cognitive Characteristic	***Source***
possesses in-depth knowledge of subject matter	Bishop, 1980; Burg, 1988; Emerick, 1992; Feldhusen, 1991; Landvogt, 2001; 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; Rejskind, 2000
possesses excellent communication skills	Bishop, 1980; Lewis, 1982

adapted from Vialle & Quigley, 2002, p. 86

As we began to explore the topic, we went on to question whether Australian gifted students differed in their views from their counterparts in other countries. Consequently, our research explored the qualities of effective teachers from the perspective of gifted adolescents in academically selective settings in Australia, Austria and the United States. In order to get a broad overview of student perceptions across the three settings, we initially collected data through the administration of a survey and have reported the findings of that research previously (see, for example, Vialle & Quigley, 2002; 2003; Vialle & Tischler, 2003). In this chapter, we are presenting the findings of the qualitative data gained from three open-ended questions that were included on the original survey. The gifted students were asked to respond to the following questions: What do you think makes a good teacher? What do you think makes an effective teacher? What qualities do you think make a teacher ineffective?

Method

Participants

Participants were students attending academically selective secondary schools in Australia, Austria and the US. In Australia, 377 students from Years 7, 9 and 11 at a Sydney selective school completed the survey; in Austria, 108 students from Grades 9 to 12 of a selective Gymnasium participated; and in the United States, 107 students from Grades 9 to 12 in a New York city high school for gifted students participated in the study. These represented convenience samples as they were schools with gifted populations that were readily accessible to the researchers. While students in each of the school settings were selected for their academic potential, no selection procedures were applied to the teachers employed at those schools. At all three school settings, then, teachers were not required to have any

specialist training in gifted education and only a small proportion had completed any such training.

Instrument

The Preferred Instructor Characteristics Scale (PICS) (Krumboltz & Farquhar, 1957) was selected for our research because of its published validity and reliability and its use in other studies with gifted students (see, for example, Abel & Karnes, 1994; Dorhout, 1983). The PICS is a 36-item questionnaire that requires respondents to select between a personal-social attribute and a cognitive-intellectual attribute of their teachers. To the original survey we added three open-ended questions in order to explore more closely the gifted students' views on the qualities of effective teachers. The open-ended questions asked them to write in their own words what they considered to be the characteristics of good teachers, effective teachers, and ineffective teachers respectively.

Procedure

The surveys were administered to the participants during class time in the school's assembly hall or classrooms. The researchers explained the purpose of their research, outlined the procedures for completing the survey, and reminded the students that their responses were anonymous. The survey took approximately twenty minutes to complete and was colour-coded to allow for separate analyses of gender and grade. The high response rate of 98% was possible because the survey was conducted in class and consequently only a handful of students elected not to participate.

Data Analysis

The open-ended questions were analysed through the use of Mayring's (2000) inductive category development model for systematic analysis of qualitative data. This model required us to define initial categories based on the research literature that were modified by our initial reading of our data. These initial categories were intellectual characteristics, personal-social characteristics, and pedagogical approaches. Within theses broad categories, inductive categories were formulated from our data that were revised and reduced and fed back into the broad categories. The revised framework was then used to interpret the entire data set.

Results

The results of the PICS questionnaire demonstrated that, when forced to make a choice, gifted students in all three cohorts preferred the personal-social characteristics to the intellectual characteristics of their teachers. However, analysis of the open-ended questions revealed a more complex relationship wherein the vast majority of students' responses combined elements of the personal along with the intellectual. Only 10% of the responses to the open-ended questions related to a single category and nearly all of these related to personal-social characteristics. Further, the students' answers also often included a third category, which we termed 'pedagogical approaches' and related to the teacher's organisation of class activities, arrangement of learning environment, and particular strategies. Overall, 20% of the open-ended responses combined all three categories with the following comments typical of the responses:

Abilities a good teacher should have: a great knowledge; knows what he/she teaches; is friendly and understands us; the ability to explain clearly and precise[ly]; should come prepared for lessons. (Austria, Year 10, female)

They have to be kind and understanding and let us learn at our own pace. They should enjoy teaching and know their subject well. (Australia, Year 7, male)

Differences among students noted in the analysis of the PICS data were that students from lower grades were more likely to prefer the personal-social characteristics of their teachers than their older counterparts. Also, the Australian and Austrian data revealed a slight preference for the personal-social characteristics among the girls compared to the boys; this pattern was reversed in the US sample where boys demonstrated a higher preference for the personal-social characteristics than the girls. Despite the consistent preferences toward the personal-social end of the continuum demonstrated by the PICS data, the open-ended questions provided data that allowed us to examine students' ideas more closely. In the analysis of the open-ended questions, the grade and gender differences, noted above, largely disappeared although there was a slight decrease in the frequency rate of references to personal-social qualities in the higher grades. We found that gifted students of all ages, ethnicity, and gender expressed similar ideas about their teachers and only differed in how articulately they expressed those ideas.

Personal-Social Characteristics

Across the three open-ended questions, the qualities described by students that relate to the personal-social category can be divided into three sub-categories: teacher-student relationships; communication skills; and, personality. The majority of responses related to teacher-student relationships and included the teacher's need to understand and care about the students' needs, abilities and work (*"help students when they don't understand"; "should be interested in us"; "should be dedicated to his students"*). Effective teachers also need to respect their students (*"treats us as mature people"; "gives power to students"; "understanding students and respecting them"*), treat them fairly (*"treat us equally"; "not have favourites"*) and to earn the respect of their students in turn (*"I can learn from him/her"; "sets an example"; "a teacher who earns respect instead of expecting it").* The teacher's communication skills were singled out as a separate sub-category because of the frequency they were raised by students (*"the ability to talk to students at their level"; "approachable when we have a problem or question"; "communicate so that we understand"*). Finally, aspects of the teacher's personality were highly valued by the students. These included emotional stability, patience, kindness, friendliness, a sense of humour, and conscientiousness. In particular, a large number of students highlighted the importance of the teacher's love of their work: *"A good teacher is someone who has a passion for teaching their subject and for helping others to come to understand it better."* Students also emphasised that effective teachers found a balance between friendliness and strictness, with extremes in either direction unwelcome.

Intellectual Characteristics

Students' comments about their teachers' intellectual characteristics can be grouped into the sub-categories of knowledge, dedication to their subject, and intelligence. The majority of comments related to the teacher's knowledge which included in-depth knowledge of their subject along with a broad general knowledge and the ability to think in an interdisciplinary

manner: *"Mr D...was just interested in everything. He's a maths teacher and he had a dictionary like that thick in his room...he relates everything, he makes it so easy to understand. He's really entertaining....But you'd learn....he'd teach us the topic and then he'd take it a step further, like a bit more challenging."* These comments were often linked with specific comments related to the teacher's commitment to their subject such as: *"passionate about their subject and can make me feel the same way – explains why what they are teaching is important."* Finally, students referred specifically to teachers as being smart, intelligent, expert, and logical thinkers.

Pedagogical Approaches

This category provided the widest variation in responses and has been organised into five sub-categories arranged in order of frequency: teaching strategies; learning environment; motivation; personal competencies; and, assessment techniques. Students indicated that they preferred teachers who provide a range of teaching strategies that allow them to be active learners (*"a good teacher is one who can vary teaching methods and encourage class discussion to break up the boredom of doing sheets every lesson"*). Their preferred learning environment is one in which there are clear and challenging expectations, where homework is integral to the learning process, where students' views are encouraged and listened to, and where students are adequately prepared for examinations. A large proportion of students valued teachers who were able to motivate them to learn: *"is well organised and knows how to get people motivated."* Personal competencies mentioned by students included the teacher's classroom management skills (*"knows how to control the class"*), their interest in teaching (*"wants to be in the classroom"*), and willingness to admit their mistakes and entertain alternative beliefs and viewpoints. Finally, students indicated that they valued assessment that was meaningful and fair, and feedback that was helpful and timely: *"they know the right amount of homework to set and return assessment and tests promptly with comments that could help us in the future."*

The foregoing analysis was drawn from the responses to all three open-ended questions. Nevertheless, we noted some patterns of difference across the three questions that need to be highlighted. In posing the open-ended questions, we had hypothesised that gifted students would distinguish between teachers they liked and those they regarded as effective. As predicted, approximately 70% of the students provided different descriptions of good teachers and effective teachers respectively. A typical pattern is encapsulated by the following student's responses:

> *A good teacher is one who is nice, kind and friendly and understands a child's view.*
> *An effective teacher is one who knows the subject and is skilled in that area.* (Australia, Year 7, male)

What makes a good teacher?

The students' responses to this question ranged across all three categories of personal-social characteristics, intellectual characteristics, and pedagogical approaches, with almost half the responses related to personal qualities (see Table 2). The uniformity of responses across the three research cohorts is particularly noteworthy.

Table 2
Percentages of students' responses to characteristics of a good teacher

Country	Intellectual characteristics	Personal-social characteristics	Pedagogical approaches
Australia	22%	48%	30%
Austria	20%	49%	31%
US	23%	45%	32%

What makes an effective teacher?

In responding to this question, the students tended to shift the focus from the personal-social characteristics to the pedagogical approaches, with the US sample providing the most dramatic shift (see Table 3). A further difference between the cohorts is that in the Australian and Austrian samples, the shift to increased emphasis on pedagogical approaches does not come at the expense of the teacher's intellectual characteristics whereas in the US sample there is a decline in this rating between the responses to the 'good' teacher and the 'effective' teacher questions.

Table 3
Percentages of students' responses to characteristics of an effective teacher

Country	Intellectual characteristics	Personal-social characteristics	Pedagogical approaches
Australia	28%	35%	37%
Austria	26%	36%	37%
US	18%	31%	51%

What makes an ineffective teacher?

The overwhelming majority of responses to this question were the opposite of the first two questions with students either writing "the opposite of above" or listing the same qualities with the words 'no' or 'lack of' preceding them. Table 4 presents the percentages of responses in each category and, again, reveals a return to the dominance of personal-social characteristics in the Australian and Austrian cohorts particularly. Another interesting pattern is that in all three cohorts, intellectual characteristics (or lack thereof) are not as important to the students in the context of this question; the students' responses indicate that many have experienced teachers who were smart enough but who did not have the matching people skills or pedagogical approaches, as indicated by the following typical student responses:

> *No people skills. A good understanding of what is being taught but does not know how to explain it in a way in which his students will understand.* (Australia, Year 11, male)

> *It's no good having someone who knows all the intricacies of a subject but then they can't teach us and get fed up when we don't understand.* (Australia, Year 11, female)

Table 4
Percentages of students' responses to characteristics of an ineffective teacher

Country	Intellectual characteristics	Personal-social characteristics	Pedagogical approaches
Australia	17%	48%	35%
Austria	18%	44%	38%
US	19%	35%	46%

Conclusion

Our study has revealed that gifted secondary students have a preference for the personal qualities of their teachers when forced to make a choice, and we noted a large measure of conformity across students from the three countries studied. In this respect our findings support previous research on gifted students' perceptions of their ideal teachers (see, for example, Abel & Karnes, 1994; Dorhout, 1983). It also is in line with the research on non-gifted populations, which demonstrates a distinct preference for personal-social characteristics. For example, a study by Delaney (2009) determined that the five most important characteristics of teachers for a sample of 450 Canadian high school students were that teachers were knowledgeable, humorous, respectful, patient, and organised.

However, the qualitative data reported in this chapter reveal a more complex picture than the quantitative data conveyed. While personal qualities of teachers were highly regarded, the descriptions provided by the gifted students showed that it was not the personal characteristics on their own that they favoured. Rather, the gifted students appreciated teachers who combined favourable personal characteristics with positive intellectual qualities and varied, active pedagogical approaches.

The data also reveal that students distinguish between the importance of these different categories, depending on whether they are describing good teachers or effective teachers. In the latter case, they shift the emphasis from the personal-social qualities to the teacher's pedagogical approaches. The dominance of the pedagogical approaches in gifted students' perceptions of effective teachers suggests that this is an important area for the training of teachers to work with gifted students. The major implication arising from this research, then, is that teachers do not need a particular set of personality characteristics in order to be effective with gifted learners; rather, they can be trained to be more effective practitioners for gifted students if we focus on the development of appropriate pedagogical approaches, positive attitudes and interpersonal skills. Research suggests that providing training on gifted children and their needs results in more positive teacher attitudes and, ultimately, more effective practices (Gross, 1994; Wellisch, 1997; Whitton, 1997).

The current study focused on gifted students' perceptions of effective teachers. Future research should supplement the students' views with studies that examine the practices of effective teachers through observation and interviews. It would also be interesting to conduct additional studies that enable comparisons of the views of gifted and non-gifted students. Finally, the development and testing of interventions to increase teacher effectiveness would be worthwhile.

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