

Can Empathy for Gifted Students Be Nurtured in Teachers?

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Ask anyone who is vested in ensuring that gifted students receive appropriate educational programming and services, and it is likely he or she has heard derogatory comments about this population from those who hold differing perspectives. Such comments often include:

- Gifted students will do just fine on their own.
- Gifted programs are elitist and give participating students an unfair advantage.
- Gifted students need to be grouped with other students, so they can learn how to get along with others.
- Gifted students are know-it-alls who think they are better than everyone else.
- Gifted students are bookworms with poor social skills.
- All children are gifted.

Such biases and negative stereotyping become deeply rooted and are often perpetuated by those who are uninformed about the characteristics and needs of gifted students. Copenhaver and McIntyre (1992) found that teachers not experienced in gifted education hold more negative views of gifted students than those who were experienced gifted education teachers. Others have concluded that teachers have more positive attitudes towards gifted students when they are exposed to coursework or professional development experiences pertaining to gifted education (Davis & Rimm, 1985; Orenstein, 1984; Weiner & O’Shea, 1963). One implication of these findings is the need to design comprehensive teacher preparation and professional development programs that help “convert negative

impressions of potentially gifted and talented students into a more appropriate understanding of such characteristics” (Heath, 1997, p. 22).

One avenue that has been explored in the literature to raise awareness of the characteristics and educational needs of gifted students is the use of effective public relations strategies (Besnoy, 2005; Karnes, Lewis, & Stephens, 1999; Troxclair & Karnes, 1997). While such efforts are promising in building community support for gifted programs and services, a more comprehensive and ongoing approach is needed to reverse the existing biases and negative attitudes held by the teachers who provide educational services to gifted students.

The characteristics of effective teachers of the gifted have been examined by many researchers over the past 40+ years (Bishop, 1968; Chan, 2001; Freehill, 1974; Hansford, 1985; Maddux, Samples-Lachman & Cummings, 1985; Mills, 2003; Newland, 1962; Renzulli, 1992; Torrance & Myers, 1970; Wendel & Heiser, 1989; Whitlock & DuCette, 1989). While there seems to be a general consensus regarding the personal and professional characteristics of successful teachers of the gifted (see Table 1), this research has typically focused on the identification of those teacher characteristics that seem to benefit gifted students in the classroom. Little research exists that examines how these identified characteristics might actually be cultivated through teacher education and professional development.

Table 1. Personal & Professional Characteristics of Effective Teachers of the Gifted Cited in the Literature

Characteristic	Bishop, 1968	Chan, 2001	Freehill, 1974	Hansford, 1985	Maddux, Samples-Lachman, & Cummings, 1985	Mills, 2003	Newland, 1962	Renzulli, 1992	Torrance & Myers, 1970	Wendel & Heiser, 1989	Whitlock & DuCette, 1989
Superior Intelligence; Knowledgeable	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	
Greater Literary and Cultural Interests	✓										
Higher Achievement Orientation	✓							✓			✓
Stimulating and Imaginative	✓	✓			✓						
Student-Centered Teaching Style; Facilitative	✓	✓			✓						
Enthusiasm for Subject Matter	✓					✓		✓		✓	✓
Preference for Teaching the Gifted	✓										
Flexible		✓		✓				✓		✓	
Self-Confident		✓		✓			✓				✓
Consideration for Individual Differences		✓									
Empathetic			✓						✓		
Love of Learning			✓				✓				
Curiosity			✓				✓				
High Energy							✓	✓			
Accepting and Open				✓			✓	✓		✓	
Strong Communication Skills				✓							
Good Sense of Humor				✓	✓					✓	

For the past three years, Duke University has offered an academically and intellectually gifted (AIG) add-on licensure program for teachers employed by area school systems. A feature of this licensure program is the use of the Duke Talent Identification Program's (Duke TIP's) summer and academic year programs for gifted students as sites for field-based training for teachers. These field experiences allow teachers to observe, in critical mass, a group of highly gifted students in an educational context. University coursework (12 semester hours), self-report survey instruments, and ongoing reflection are also integral parts of Duke's AIG licensure program.

Review of pre- and post-assessment data from participating teachers is currently underway, and preliminary results seem to note a change in teachers' perceptions of gifted students as they become more informed regarding the characteristics and educational needs of these students and as they engage in field experiences with highly gifted students.

Method

Thirty-eight elementary and middle school teachers enrolled in the Duke AIG licensure program were given a pre-assessment survey during their first class meeting. The items on the survey asked teachers to:

1. define giftedness,
2. describe the academic characteristics of a gifted learner,
3. describe the social and emotional characteristics of a gifted learner, and
4. draw a picture of a gifted learner.

An identical post-assessment was administered one year later during the final class meeting. These assessments were then assigned a unique numerical identifier so pre- and post-assessments for each participant could be linked while ensuring teacher anonymity.

In addition to the survey, daily written reflections were required of teachers during the field experiences with highly gifted learners. Teachers were given a series of writing prompts to consider. For example:

1. What are your initial thoughts regarding the academic and social-emotional characteristics of the students in your Duke TIP class? What did you observe that supported your current beliefs about the nature and needs of gifted students? What did you observe that challenged your previous perceptions of gifted and talented students? Discuss and incorporate specific examples that you observed today that support your thoughts.
2. Reflect on a particular student in your Duke TIP class. Write about what you have learned about him or her over the course of the three weeks. How do the characteristics he or she exhibits – academically, socially, and emotionally – compare or contrast with what you learned through your AIG coursework? Think about your role as a teacher, in what ways has it been transformed as a result of this experience?

Preliminary Results

While it is apparent that teachers demonstrate growth in their overall knowledge of giftedness and increased awareness of those characteristics often associated with gifted students, their drawings of gifted students also reveal increased empathy for and understanding of such students. Figures 1–6 are a sampling of the teacher's drawings from the pre- and post-assessment.

Both drawings from Teacher A (Figures 1 and 2) seem to address academic and emotional issues experienced by gifted learners, with the pre-assessment drawing (Figure 1) focusing on those characteristics of perfectionism that might often be associated with gifted youth. In addition, the overall emphasis in Figure 1 seems to be achievement motivation. Figure 2 is a more simple drawing, but the addition of the heart and the question, "What will they think of me?" further humanizes the gifted learner. The motivation and goal orientation of the gifted learner in Figure 2 moves towards making connections with others and finding his or her "place" in the world.

Figure 1. Pre-assessment Teacher A

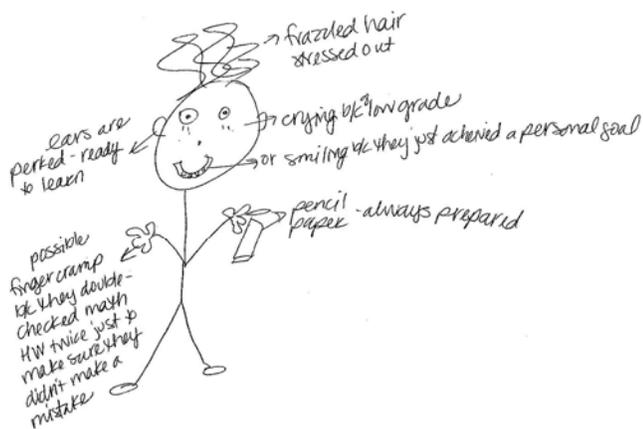
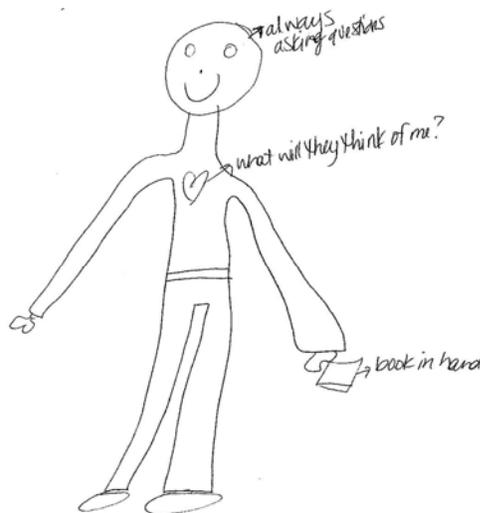


Figure 2. Post-assessment Teacher A



Teacher B transitioned from an apparent elitist perception of the gifted learner (i.e., one whom “the light of God” shines upon; see Figure 3) to a view that gifted students can be found

across all groups of people regardless of gender, ethnicity, race, or social status (Figure 4).

Figure 5. Pre-assessment Teacher C

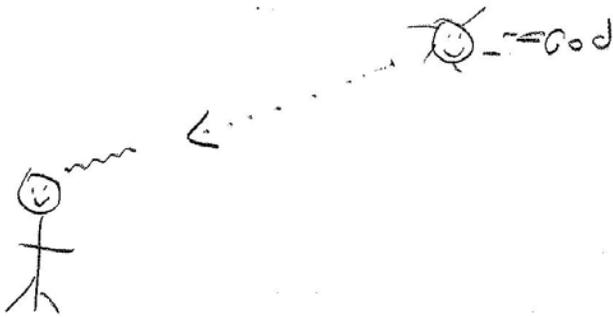


Figure 4. Post-assessment Teacher B



Though a love of learning and reading seems to be represented in both drawings from Teacher C, the pre-assessment drawing depicts the stereotypical gifted learner (i.e., male with glasses) with narrowly defined,

obscure interests. The post-assessment drawing depicts one who is well-rounded and genuinely loves learning and thus conveys a more positive representation of a gifted learner.

Figure 5. Pre-assessment Teacher C

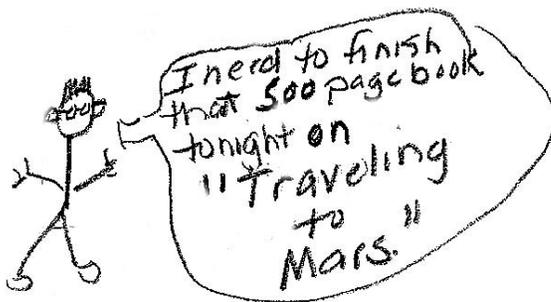
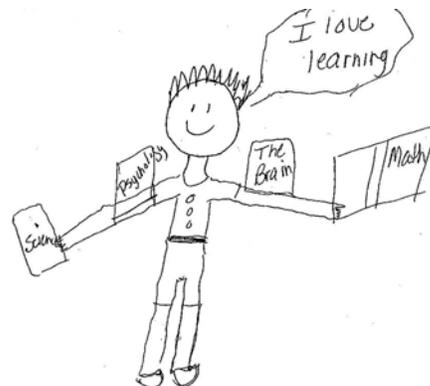


Figure 6. Post-assessment Teacher C



Teachers' written reflections also provide data to support that the field experience with highly gifted learners served as a catalyst to foster empathy among participating teachers for gifted learners. The following excerpts from teachers' final journal entries illustrate this point.

...I kept thinking that there was something wistful about Ryan,¹ something that weighed heavily on him, something that keeps him from really enjoying this time in his life. It seemed to me that Ryan has a pretty good sense of who he is and what he likes, but is living in a world where he can't allow himself to just let go and be who he is – not like he can at TIP. These three weeks are the highlight of his year. Something is so wrong about that, not just for Ryan, but for so many of these students.

...She knew that she was in the top of her class, but her eyes teared up when she told me about a recent game played in her 8th grade class. She explained that the students in the class were supposed to walk around the room and write something nice on another person's back. She talked about various acceptable attributes such

as being a good friend or a sympathetic person. She then exclaimed that the only attribute noted by her classmates about her was that she was smart. She said that this was stupid. She thought that being smart was a pathetic response to the task at hand. It hurt her feelings that no one had anything else to say about her as a person. This clearly affected Sara and it suddenly made me feel sorry for her. I could understand how she felt. Her intellectual giftedness was all that was noted by her peers, yet she felt that there were many more interesting personality traits about her worth noting. I wondered if other gifted kids have had similar experiences. I'm sure they have.

Summary

This research is in the preliminary stages and is ongoing. While teachers' knowledge and understanding of gifted learners is enhanced through coursework in the field, actual opportunities to observe and engage with a class of highly gifted learners seem to solidify these understandings and may foster empathy toward the experiences of gifted learners. ❖

¹Student names have been changed for confidentiality

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