

## Do I need a personality transplant to be a good teacher?

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Teachers are important catalysts in the talent development process, assisting pupils with potential to perform at levels commensurate with their abilities. The question remains, though, as to what aspects of a teacher are integral to the achievements of able pupils. In my research, I sought to discover the characteristics of teachers that were most appreciated by their able pupils. More specifically, I asked the pupils what they valued in their teachers, and whether the teacher's personality or intelligence was more important. Opinions on this question are divided among teachers, with some believing that able pupils do not differ from other pupils in preferring the personality characteristics while others assume that bright pupils want equally intelligent teachers.

The gifted education literature is replete with descriptions of the characteristics of effective teachers, which can be grouped under three headings: personal or social qualities; intellectual or cognitive qualities; and, teaching approaches or pedagogical skills. Recurring personal and social qualities are that the teacher of the gifted, (1) has insights into the cognitive, social and emotional needs of gifted students; (2) possesses a sense of humour; (3) is enthusiastic; (4) is culturally responsive; and (5) is willing to make mistakes. Among the intellectual or cognitive qualities, the most important were, (1) in-depth knowledge of subject matter; (2) above average intelligence; (3) broad interests, often literary and cultural; (4) lifelong learners; (5) creative; and (6) excellent communication skills. In the final category, an effective teacher of gifted students is described as one who, (1) has skills in differentiating the curriculum for gifted students; (2) employs strategies that encourage higher level thinking; (3) encourages students to be independent learners; (4) provides student-centred learning opportunities; (5) acts as a facilitator or "guide on the side"; (6) creates a non-threatening learning environment; and, (7) is well organised.

My initial foray into this topic was to talk to focus groups of primary school pupils who were enrolled in a gifted program. These Year 5 and 6 able pupils rated understanding and helpfulness as the most important aspects of an effective teacher. Not many pupils thought their teachers needed to be smart but the ability to facilitate their learning by providing challenging tasks was very important. A sense of humour, creativity and curiosity were other qualities frequently mentioned. Finally, the students required their teachers to make the work interesting and to be well organised.

In a more comprehensive study, I focussed on the perceptions of effective teachers held by able secondary pupils, again enrolled in a full-time gifted program. With my colleague, Kornelia Tischler, I administered a survey that had two components: the first included 36 statements, which called for students to choose between a personal characteristic and an intellectual characteristic of their teacher; the second included open-ended questions. Cohorts of pupils from Australia, Austria and the United States completed the survey. For all three cohorts, the personal characteristics of the teachers were more important than the intellectual characteristics. There were significant grade differences with the younger pupils more often selecting personal characteristics, compared to the older pupils. There was also a significant gender difference with girls more likely to select the personal characteristic than boys; however, this difference was small.

The analysis of the open-ended questions and follow-up focus group interviews revealed a much more complex relationship than was evident from the data gained

from the first part of the survey. While the pupils enjoyed teachers who had engaging personalities, they also appreciated both their intellectual characteristics and the teaching strategies they employed. The most common responses were:

- teachers' 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"*);
- teachers who 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"*);
- teachers who have in-depth knowledge of their subject, 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"*);
- they provide a range of teaching strategies that allow the pupils 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"*).

The pupils described their ideal learning environment as one in which there are clear and challenging expectations, where homework is integral to the learning process, where pupils' views are encouraged and listened to, and where pupils are adequately prepared for examinations. They valued teachers who were able to motivate them to learn and who possessed classroom management skills (*"knows how to control the class"*), had interest in teaching (*"wants to be in the classroom"*), and willingness to admit their mistakes and entertain alternative beliefs and viewpoints. Finally, the pupils 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"*).

Seventy percent of the pupils distinguished between "good" teachers, whose lessons they enjoyed, and "effective" teachers, as indicated in the following: *"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."* Perhaps not surprisingly, the pupils referred to personal-social characteristics when describing good teachers but were much more likely to refer to pedagogical approaches when describing effective teachers.

Our research suggests that effective teachers of able pupils are not "born" but can "be made". While the pupils appreciate teachers with good personal and social qualities, they would prefer to be taught by teachers who are "the whole package". In other words, teachers will be more effective practitioners for able pupils if they develop appropriate pedagogical approaches and work on their interpersonal skills.