



## Research Article

# Teachers of gifted children: the essential core competencies

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### Abstract

Teaching is an exceptionally challenging task but teaching gifted/talented/creative learners presents even more challenges, while at the same time providing excellent opportunities for professional growth and development. This paper reviews some of the main skills needed to teach gifted children, examines the competencies of teachers of gifted children and highlights the protocols that should underpin and facilitate exceptionally competent teachers of gifted children. The previous era had required an education for stability, the coming era requires an education for instability. In this review, the differences of teachers of gifted students, especially their knowledge level about diagnostic processes, their expertise and competencies in intellectual assessment, high-level, critical and philosophical thinking skills are discussed in detail.

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## Introduction

There are teachers, and then there are teachers, and there are special education teachers, developmental/remedial teachers, and teachers of specialisms, subjects, teaching at home, at school, indoors and outdoors. Life is about learning and teaching about life takes place in many varied environments and setting. One challenging area of teaching which we argue informs all other teaching contexts and content is the teacher of the gifted children. Just as there are different contents and skills to be taught in different settings and contexts, there are minimally competent, competent, and exceedingly competent teachers of gifted and talented and creative children and adolescents. This paper will examine the vast panorama of skills that teachers of the gifted need and will explore the various competencies needed by these teachers in addition to core teacher competencies which underpin effective and valuable teaching practice.

### What are the Differences of Teachers of Gifted Students?

Every child deserves to learn something new at school every day; gifted children are no different from any other child in this respect. Gifted and talented children should learn from teachers who are prepared to deliver the appropriate

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curriculum, using the most effective strategies, to ensure this learning occurs. School should also be a place where gifted and talented children's social and emotional needs are understood and met. Gifted and talented children thrive when they are taught by teachers who understand the ways that their learning and their social and emotional needs differ from their peers of the same age and who know how to address those needs (World Council for Gifted and Talented Children, 2021).

Obviously, before the teaching process begins, a teacher may want to check the child's file to gain a certain degree of perspective and information about the child. The child may have certain strengths and weaknesses- identified by either the parents or a previous teacher or a school psychologist who has evaluated the student.

### **Identification Process Knowledge**

Teachers need to be aware of the various tests used to identify gifted children and have at least a minimal understanding of the meaning of the scores and numbers. Such purview will give teachers at least a gross evaluation of the child and perhaps where intervention is needed. A child may be mathematically precocious or be "high verbal" or have well developed visual spatial skills. A child may at the same time be oppositional, defiant, hostile, or negativistic as their needs may not have been addressed in the past.

It follows that already in the very early discussion about identifying competencies that are required to be a successful and effective teacher of the gifted learner several key competencies identify themselves.

- Listening: by which we mean gathering information about the gifted learner in the round
- Listening some more: it is an essential feature of any teacher of the gifted that the teacher listens to what a young learner wants from learning and being taught. Let the learner guide you the teacher is a good rule.
- Reflective listening: Having gathered a lot of information about who you are teaching now it is time to listen to yourself. How will you work with this particular child?

If a teacher only teaches in one way, then they may conclude that the learners who can't develop and evidence learning do not have even basic abilities thus blocking the possibility of any particularly gifted or talented abilities. Sometimes gifted children must survive the ignorance and mono skills evidenced by a mono-teaching style of choice which matches a teacher's limitations or preferred learning style.

- Being very relaxed about not meeting predictable measures of measuring knowledge.
- Being able to be humble in the face of an Everest/ Mount McKinley size intellect evidenced in a gifted two-year old or older child.
- More listening: an imperative present in all gifted teachers of the gifted learner is the ability to self-reflect, adapt and refresh to make and identify progress in the learning relationship.
- Be happy to carry the bag and help negotiate puzzlement in a young learner when faced with incomprehensible stupidity in the world.
- Recognise the full range of learning needs a gifted child will be interested in including developing spiritual intelligence.

I doubt very much if it is possible to teach anyone to understand anything, that is to say, to see how various parts of it relate to all the other parts, to have a model of the structure in one's mind. We can give other people names, and lists, but we cannot give them our mental structures; they must build their own (Holt, 1964).

Courage in accepting that teaching is about learning for everyone involved – a partnership not a dictatorship. Importantly, an important skill-competency of a gifted teacher of the gifted learner is to recognise when another and others need to become involved in the education of a gifted child.

A highly competent teacher performs a type of intellectual triage in terms of attempting to ascertain what goals and objectives to work on immediately in the short run and what skills and abilities need to be ameliorated in the long run.

### **The Senior-Shaughnessy Test for Gifted Teachers of the Gifted Identification Process Knowledge**

"The Turing test, originally called the imitation game by Alan Turing in 1950, is a test of a machine's ability to exhibit intelligent behaviour equivalent to, or indistinguishable from, that of a human. ... If the evaluator cannot reliably tell the machine from the human, the machine is said to have passed the test."

The Senior-Shaughnessy Test for Teachers (with apologies to Alan Turing) is a test of a teacher of the gifted that is a test of a teacher's ability to exhibit intelligent responses equivalent to, or indistinguishable from that of an able learner. If the evaluator cannot reliably tell the gifted teacher from the gifted learner, the gifted teacher is said to have passed the test.

**Listening-** Listening to gifted students is important. Listening to all students is imperative- but more so with gifted students as they have their own interests, their own concerns, their own past negative experiences and sometimes, quite divergent interests and idiosyncratic realms of interest. Some gifted students are suspicious of adults based on past educational experiences, and not all adults go to the trouble of trying to establish rapport with them. Some gifted students have invested a great deal in a certain area of study (for example mollusks) that is foreign to the average person or teacher (Piaget started out studying mollusks).

**Listening Some More-** By "listening some more" we mean that there are always underlying themes and threads- emotional or social that need to be reflected upon. Their past relationships with parents may become apparent, their past relationships with teachers- even siblings may become apparent as they discuss certain things. In the past, teachers may have given them "short shrift" as we say- listened for 2-3 minutes then moved on to another agenda or area of interest.

**Humble Listening-** Being very relaxed about not meeting predictable measures of measuring knowledge- Teachers need to understand that the process of "measuring knowledge" is not an easy task- and information gained today may not be used until weeks or months or even years later.

Being able to be humble in the face of an Everest/ Mount McKinley size intellect evidenced in a gifted two-year old or older child. Teachers must grasp the humble fact that they are adults with years of experience, and the child is, well, still a child. He or she may have an I.Q. of 150- but they may have not experienced the many things that an adult has experienced—a car accident, a death, hospitalization or much worse- cancer.

**Even More Listening-** As the student progresses from topic to topic- subject to subject and teacher to teacher. Be happy to carry the bag and help negotiate puzzlement in a young learner when faced with incomprehensible stupidity in the world. Gifted students are perceptive- they see the inconsistencies in the world. They see the illogic in certain things. They see what is valued, and they see poverty, illness, and injustice in the world. And they are saddened by it. Engaging gifted students in the use of their spiritual intelligence provides opportunities for them to honor life's most meaningful questions: How can I make a difference? Why am I here? Does my life have meaning? Discussing such questions allows students to focus on something larger than their egos; they can connect to the lives of others, the community, the earth, and the cosmos to build a global aware-ness of the growing challenges in the world (Sisk, 2008).

### **Intellectual Assessment- Higher Order Thinking Skills vs Critical Thinking Skills**

First, a good competent teacher of the gifted should review whatever testing has already been done on the child. A deep understanding of the meaning of I.Q. scores and the tests administered is imperative. Two students may both be in the same gifted class- but one was given the Wechsler Intelligence Scale for Children- 5th Edition and another may have been given the Stanford Binet- Fifth Edition. While both students may have received a Full-Scale I.Q. score of 140- there may be many subtle differences between these two students. And each student may show different strengths and weaknesses and perhaps even different learning styles.

Often consultation with a school psychologist who has administered the test will provide additional insights into how the student processes information. Some students evaluate, integrate, synthesize, and compare and contrast information quite well, effectively and efficiently and other student think critically about every word and sentence that they hear and refuse to take anything a face value. They are critical thinkers who are always looking for the proof, the

data, the evidence. The juxtaposition of higher order thinking skills and critical thinking skills which have been outlined by Shaughnessy (2012) with contributing chapters from many of the world's leaders in thinking and problem-solving skills.

### **Scientific Reasoning versus Philosophical Thinking**

For some students, math is a preferred subject while for others, science, biology, chemistry, and physics are their preferred areas. Mathematical thinking is quite different than scientific reasoning and scientific reasoning is far different than philosophical reasoning. Some students enjoy the scientific method- examining independent and dependent variables and hypotheses and outcomes, and formulating conclusions, and suggestions and recommendations based on their science projects, while others prefer to debate the pros and cons of abortion.

**Social Skills** (with others) versus Emotional Coping Strategies (with self and others). The skilled teacher of gifted assesses, sometimes formally, sometimes informally the social and interpersonal skills of their students. They may observe male to male interactions, female to female interactions and student to teacher interactions.

### **Reading**

Many gifted students are voracious readers. They consume magazines, books, and periodicals and one thing we want to do is to encourage their reading. A good teacher of the gifted is able to analyze and assess what the student is currently reading, and encourage additional reading, and determine the author or authors that a student may enjoy, and which books would benefit the student. There is an art and a science to recommending books and authors. Although we cannot train teachers in this brief article, we can suggest some individuals and some resources. Halsted (2009) has an excellent book entitled "Some of my best friends are books" and this text is now in its third edition. The book is subtitled "Guiding Gifted Readers" and this is what many very competent teachers of the gifted do - they guide readers to books and authors which they believe may benefit the student.

### **The Gifted Educator: Competencies Protocol**

Any Competencies Protocol is going to necessarily be built on a bedrock of basic teacher competencies such as exemplified by Abbotsford School District

#### **Teaching Competencies**

- Effective - Communication and Interpersonal Skills.
- Professional - Organization and Planning.
- Efficient - Classroom Management.
- Transparent - Facilitation and Engagement.
- Knowledgeable - Assessment and Coaching.
- Committed - Collaboration and Teamwork.
- Tolerant - Caring and Inclusiveness.
- Empathetic - Flexibility and Adaptability.

It is the essential additionality that we can focus on in order that we may feel confidence in our support for the teacher of the gifted.

As we move to consider the future of gifted education being carried out by educators with essential competencies specifically applicable to the needs of the gifted learner it is worth us taking a quick glance at a pre-pandemic paper from 2017 which, still being valuable and relevant to our discussion, seems to be from another distant time.

To face the continuous changes that impose on all the orders of life around us, such as a global economy and rapid scientific and technological advances, we find ourselves obliged to acquire new personal, social, and professional skills that nowadays are essential. The school context is no exception.

To do this, teachers require a new educational approach, more critical and ingenious, to develop creative projects, where they are the facilitators of learning (Feldhusen, 1985).

From his research, Mazariegos (2020) identified skills the 21st-century teacher would need to develop.

- Organize and implement learning situations. Must have the ability to engage the students in the participation or development of research that provides them with tools to cope with everyday situations.
- Manage the learning progress. Implement strategies to manage the development of learning through problem situations that are part of the reality of each student.
- Practice strategies of inclusion. Encourage collaborative work based on tolerance and respect for the integrity of others.
- Involve students in their learning and work. Create strategies that involve students in developing the capacity for self-assessment of their knowledge to become aware of the progress they have made.
- Work in teams. Have the ability to engage students in teamwork and take leadership so that they can work enthusiastically toward achieving its goals and objectives.
- Participate in school management. Get involved in school management by developing management competencies, coordination, and organization of human resources to create an excellent institutional climate.
- Learn and apply innovative technologies. Be able to use new technologies, incorporating current methods, using technical and educational skills.
- Face duties and ethical dilemmas of the profession. Face responsibilities and ethical dilemmas to cultivate communicative competency, that is, a person's ability to compose him/herself and communicate effectively and appropriately.
- Train continuously. Have the ability to organize and promote one's continuous training to be continually competitive in a globalized world (Mazariegos, 2020).

We can compare Mazariegos's conclusion with earlier research by Feldhusen who identifies five areas for consideration when looking at the competencies required by a teacher of the gifted and the considerations of what is required to encourage and develop 'teachers of the gifted.'

- Personal and psychological characteristics of the teacher of the gifted
- Competencies which the teacher ought to possess
- The design of in-service training
- The professional education of teachers and
- the professional capabilities of teacher trainers (Feldhusen, 1985).

Mazariegos raises a crucial point in regard to considering the necessary competencies required by a teacher of the gifted, namely that of being highly responsive and adaptable to changes in the global and local world experience of both themselves as an educator and of the living experience of their gifted learners. This would indicate a competence of key importance being both reflective and reflexive resilience. Additionally the teacher of the gifted needs to be both aware of and skilled with both high order thinking skills and essential critical thinking skills. The other point worth mentioning is that a consideration of the abilities and competencies of the teachers of the teachers of gifted learners also needs deep – thoughtful – informed consideration. This perhaps is a discussion for another time.

### **Competencies Protocol**

Ten competencies for today and the future guidance for what we used to call teachers of the gifted student and now must identify as gifted co-learners who can swim with the storm, adapt to changing circumstances with an ample intelligence to survive.

*Manage the learning progress.* Working with gifted learners to identify, derive and implement strategies to manage the development of learning through problem situations that are part of the reality of each student as a co-learner.

*Face duties and ethical dilemmas of the profession.* Face responsibilities and ethical dilemmas to cultivate communicative competency: to compose themselves, be fearless and communicate effectively, honestly, and appropriately with co-learners.

*Lifelong learning.* Recognizing that learning is not a finite activity and to have a readiness to be curious, take risks, accept failure, accept success.

*Continuous development.* Actively pursuing the co-learner/educator's personal and professional interests. Being cognisant of best professional practice in a globalized world.

*Risk taking.* Demonstrating the self-confidence and freedom to fail and keep trying

*Social-Cultural awareness.* Welcome difference and celebrate difference and who know how to address individual needs

*Humble listening.* To recognise that careful, critical listening is the teacher of the gifted learners best guide to a gifted learners thinking.

*Emotionally literate.* To role model and share emotional resilience, and wellbeing empowerment

*Communication competencies.* To be able to understand how a question asked should be a question answered.

*Generous understanding.* Gifted and talented children thrive when they are taught by teachers who understand the ways that their learning and their social and emotional needs differ from their peers of the same age.

Although it is hard to discourage the investigations of a 2-year-old, it is all too easy to discourage those of 7-, 11-, or 15-year-olds. In one classroom I observed, a 9<sup>th</sup> grader raised her hand to ask if there were any places in the world where no one made art. The teacher stopped her mid-sentence with, "Zoe, no questions now, please; it's time for learning." (Berliner, 2020) .

For now and the near future we urgently need to be offering guidance as to who will be the most effective co-learner to collaborate with the gifted and insatiable learner. The days of the teacher in the traditional sense are over. The skills and resources, both physical, intellectual, and philosophical all demand attention. From the past we can draw an essential list of competencies that whilst not exhaustive, are helpmates in managing a modern ever changing, highly demanding learner environment where the one key competency is being empathetically flexible to the needs of other co-learners. The question for educators today is not 'What should schools teach the gifted learner? The question we must ask and answer now is how can we help the gifted learner learn what they want to learn?

### Final Words

While as a guide the United Nations Charter offers many interesting points to consider and for education authorities to provide such as:

- Every student should have the right to have access to a process in order to be identified as gifted and/or talented considering all the complexity of giftedness and/or talent. This complex process, when possible, should be free of charge or, in any case, economic status and cultural background should not be an obstacle for taking part of this process.
- In every school or district there should be a trained person for the identification of gifted and talented students (this person could be the psychologist of the school or a trained supervisor). This person should interview, monitor, and recommend testing if he/she thinks that one or more students can be gifted and/or talented. The testing can be done at any age.
- Every teacher should receive a basic training in how to identify talented and gifted students in order to assist in the identification process (United Nations, 2016)

"Teachers' competencies have been broadening with respect to reform studies in education, development of teacher education, scientific results of educational science and other fields. Kress (2000) pointed out that "the previous era had required an education for stability, the coming era requires an education for instability." Kress' ideas can explain why teachers' professional development should be redefined for sustainability. The aims of education change very quickly depending on the demands of the era requiring more capability. These demands directly affect educational system."

It is time now to focus on the real challenge facing us in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century regarding our responsibility to our gifted learners. How do they want to learn and who do they want to be a co-learner with them. Now we suggest that in 2022 and for the immediate future that the capability to be a co-learner in addition to facilitation is a key competency in other words the educator as an insatiable learner.

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### Supplementary notes

(PDF) *Teachers' Competencies*. Available from: [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/283961538\\_Teachers'\\_Competencies](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/283961538_Teachers'_Competencies)  
"Teachers' competencies have been broadening with respect to reform studies in education, development of teacher education, scientific results of educational science and other fields. Kress pointed out that "the previous era had required an education for stability, the coming era requires an education for instability" (133). Kress' ideas can explain why teachers' professional development should be redefined for sustainability. The aims of education change very quickly depending on the demands of the era requiring more capability. These demands directly affect educational system."