Developing Academic Self-Efficacy:

Strategies to Support Gifted Elementary School Students

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Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Science in Education

School of Education and Counseling Psychology

Dominican University of California

San Rafael, CA

April 2012

Acknowledgements

I would like to acknowledge and thank the faculty at Dominican University of California for their guidance, support, and inspiration. Thanks to Dr. Mary Crosby for her patient assistance, always with the assurance that the teacher I am meant to be is already within me and to Dr. Sarah Zykanov for her insight and wisdom that the challenge and gift of education is within each person's own journey. Thanks to Dr. Madalienne Peters for having confidence in me when I did not and for shining a bright light of encouragement onto my own path which often times seemed so dark and uncertain. I would also like to acknowledge and appreciate Karey Basche, my mentor teacher and inspiration, whose honest, loving, and rich approach to teaching for meaningful learning impacted my career and life in a way that I will forever cherish and honor. Especially I would like to acknowledge my parents and two sisters, who are the most loving and supportive people in my life, always granting me grace along my journey.

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Abstract

Self-efficacy is the belief in one's capacity to perform and accomplish goals. Specifically, academic self-efficacy refers to a student's perception of their ability to engage and successfully complete academic tasks. Self-efficacy affects students' behavioral choices, motivation, thought patterns and responses, perception of control, and academic productivity.

Success is the greatest factor affecting a student's self-efficacy and gifted elementary school students are regularly successful academically in mainstream United States classrooms. However, in the face of a true intellectual challenge, rather than be inspired to learn and grow, the literature reports that gifted students' academic self-efficacy can falter because of perfectionism, a character trait common amongst this population. According to the literature, perfectionism can paralyze gifted students with fear of failure and reduce their academic self-efficacy, causing them to underachieve.

The purpose of this research is to document the best practices for helping gifted elementary school students develop their self-efficacy. Interviews with educators of gifted students reveal strategies elementary school teachers can implement in their mainstream classrooms to help gifted students expand their learning and develop the self-efficacy necessary to become confident, inquisitive, life-long learners.

Chapter 1 Introduction

As a child, I loved school, reading, learning, and my teachers. In my primary elementary school years, academics came fairly easily to me and I so enjoyed doing well in school. My wonderful teachers provided me a positive experience of education, and I remember them all very fondly- so fondly, in fact, that I became one myself!

Despite their best efforts to provide academic challenges, I never felt that I had to try very hard to set and accomplish academic goals. Additionally, I did not have the intrinsic motivation to challenge myself to go beyond the standard curriculum independently. Whatever effort I put in was enough to get the grade I desired and that was enough for me.

My parents and teachers praised me by telling me I was "smart". I developed the belief that being smart equated to not needing to try. I thought that not knowing an answer or needing to ask for help would completely negate my intelligence and then what would I be praised for? I thought that if I showed I did not know how to do something right away, people would discover I was not as smart as they thought I was.

I was able to function this way in elementary school, but by the time I was in high school, my educational opportunities expanded. Suddenly, I was able to enroll in Honors/AP classes and I did so. However, that is where I came to a major road block in my education. Classes were very challenging and for the first time, things were not coming easily to me. I did not know how to cope with this transition. I had no confidence, persistence, problem solving strategies, study habits, or experience asking for the help I

so needed. I was afraid that if I truly tried to succeed, and failed, that I would no longer be sure of the identity I was trying so hard to establish. I made the decision to stop trying, because I thought that giving up was a better alternative to not being smart enough. I had no confidence in myself to persevere and succeed academically.

Reflecting on my early elementary education, I can only wonder how I could have been successful during my high school and subsequent early college educational experiences. Instead of just believing that I was smart in elementary school, if I had developed a true belief in myself that I was capable of accomplishing goals and solving problems, I might have had enough confidence down the road to attempt academic challenges. Instead of thinking that getting an "A" meant I was smart, if I believed that being smart is a product of effort and hard work, and that failing is sometimes a part of learning, I might have had the motivation to persevere to acquire the deep and meaningful educational opportunities that was available to me.

Statement of Problem

In an effort to close the achievement gap, there is such an emphasis, albeit worthy, to meet the needs of elementary school students who are below grade level, that mainstream classroom teachers are left without much time or resources to develop a challenging curriculum for their above-grade level or gifted students. Below grade level students are exposed to many opportunities to face academic challenges and, thus, develop the skills to address and tackle these challenges.

However, this is not the case for gifted students in early education. They do not have as many opportunities to face these challenges in their developmental years because they quickly comprehend and master the standard academic curriculum. If gifted students are not challenged, it is often easy for them to achieve perfect grades. Based on these experiences, gifted students maintain perfection as the acceptable and expected standard for their performance, even as they encounter challenging material later in their academic careers. If gifted students experience challenging curriculum in their early elementary education, they have more opportunities to experience failures and, as a result, would be more likely to develop the resiliency to cope with not always succeeding.

The problem is that gifted students will eventually, in fact, have opportunities for academic challenges, but at that point will not have sufficiently developed the skills and mindset to successfully approach these situations, resulting in decreased academic self-efficacy. Gifted elementary school students who have more frequent opportunities for challenging educational opportunities develop a greater sense of positive academic self-efficacy than do students who receive fewer opportunities for challenging and enriching curriculum. It is important to help these students overcome their perfectionism so that they can develop their self-efficacy in such a way that they will become motivated, inquisitive, autonomous, life-long learners.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this research is to discover strategies teachers can implement in a mainstream elementary school classroom to help gifted elementary school students

overcome their challenges and foster their academic self-efficacy. Students with positive self-efficacy succeed at their greatest capacity. Enhancing a gifted students' self-efficacy creates engaged, confident, successful students.

Research Question

What are the best methods to help gifted elementary school students develop their academic self-efficacy? Gifted students have an innate, personal aptitude for intellectual activities. Academic self efficacy in students is the belief that one will be successful in accomplishing goals.

Theoretical Rationale

According to Bandura's (1977) Social Learning Theory, people learn new socially desirable behaviors and information through their observations of others. Social learning is affected by group dynamics and how individuals behave in their interactions. Attention, retention, reproduction, and motivation are factors that play a role in the success of social learning.

Bandura's (1986) Social Cognitive Theory emphasizes that an individual's actions and reactions are influenced by the actions which that individual has observed in others. Social Cognitive Theory connects human behavior, environmental factors, and personal factors. Bandura's work conceptualized individuals as self-organizing, proactive, self-reflecting, and self-regulating rather than reactive beings shaped solely by environmental forces or driven by inner forces alone.

Bandura's (1986) Social Cognitive Theory examines self-regulation as the interaction between the person's beliefs about success, his/her behavior or engagement in a task, and the environment or feedback he/she receives. Expanding on this perspective, Zimmerman & Martinez-Pons (1990) specified self-observation, self-judgment, and self-reactions as three important characteristics of self-regulated learning.

Self-efficacy is a person's belief in one's own capacity to perform in a certain manner to achieve certain goals. Bandura's (1997) self-efficacy research showed a strong correlation between self-efficacy and self-regulated behavioral changes and social interactions. One's self-efficacy can play a major role in how one approaches goals, tasks, and challenges. People with high self-efficacy are more likely to view difficult tasks as something to be mastered rather than something to be avoided (Bandura & Others, 1996).

Assumptions

My first assumption is that, due to budget cuts, Gifted and Talented Education (GATE) is not providing sufficient academic enrichment for gifted students to develop the self-regulation needed to have high academic self-efficacy. My second assumption is that gifted students are not being provided with sufficient opportunities to develop academic self-efficacy within mainstream United States classrooms. My third assumption is that if teachers had the knowledge, time, and resources to effectively foster learners with positive self-efficacy, they would.

Background and Need

Research by Renzulli (1978) presents a broadened conception of giftedness in which giftedness is not solely reflected in tests of intelligence, achievement, and academic aptitude, but is evaluated based on multiple talent areas including music, art, drama, leadership, public speaking, social service, creative writing or skills in interpersonal relations. Renzulli identifies two separate, yet often interactive, types of giftedness: schoolhouse giftedness and creative-productive giftedness.

Renzulli has developed a three-ring model of giftedness, the Enrichment Triad Model, which focuses on the interaction between the teacher, the learner, and the curriculum. His model supports identifying and developing creativity and giftedness in young students and presents organizational models and curricular strategies for total school improvement (Renzulli, 1977, 1986). Renzulli's model has evolved into his Schoolwide Enrichment Model which further broadens the scope and increases flexibility in defining students' giftedness (Renzulli & Reis, 1997).

The largest group of gifted students at risk for low self-efficacy is made up of the children found in the regular classroom (Smutny, 2002). Many educators, legislators, and otherwise thoughtful members of society still believe that gifted students can manage on their own, that intelligence is a fixed, inherited trait and therefore, is not affected by the lack of quality educational experiences. The flexibility, choice, differentiation, and modification of curriculum needed for all children to experience continuous growth and intellectual progress is often not viewed as practical in the regular classroom, while

meeting the needs of the lowest students as well. This gap in the educational system puts the majority of gifted children at risk of squandering their most valuable abilities and inhibiting them from their intellectual growth and development. Most importantly, they lack the support they require to surmount obstacles and to develop positive academic self-efficacy.

Chapter 2 Review of the Literature

Introduction

Extensive research has been conducted in the area of gifted students, perfectionism, self-regulation, and self-efficacy. For the purposes of this paper, the review of previous literature focuses on the social and emotional characteristics of gifted students and how these traits affect academic self-efficacy.

Historical Context

In the early 1900s, the French government put laws into effect that required all French children attend school. According to Siegler (1992), they realized the importance of identifying children who would need specialized assistance. The French government requested psychologist Binet help identify students who were most likely to experience difficulty in their education (Siegler, 1992).

Binet and his colleague Simon developed a series of questions that measured more abstract qualities not taught in school, such as problem-solving skills, memory, and attention (Siegler, 1992). Binet was able to discover which of these measures served as the best indicators of school success.

Siegler (1992) reports Binet discovered that some children were able to answer more advanced questions that older children were generally able to answer and that other children of the same age were only able to answer questions that younger children could

typically answer. Binet coined the concept of a mental age, a measure of intelligence based on the average abilities of children of a certain age group.

The Binet-Simon Scale, the original intelligence test, is the foundation for the intelligence tests still in use today. However, Binet admitted that the test could not be used to measure a single, permanent and inborn level of intelligence (Kamin, 1995). In alignment with more modern theories of intelligence, Binet suggested that intelligence is a broad concept that cannot be quantified with a single number. Binet believed that intelligence is influenced by various factors, changes over time, and can only be compared among children with comparable histories (Siegler, 1992).

Spearman's (1904) research led to the development of a statistical measurement tool which is considered the first theory of intelligence. The *g factor*, a representation of *general intelligence*, is an instrument which models the mental abilities that affect results in various cognitive ability tests.

Spearman (1904) discovered that young students' grades throughout all subject matters had a positive correlation. He theorized that these correlations reflected the influence of an underlying factor, which he termed "general intelligence." His model explained variations in two factors in variations in intelligence tests. First, the individual abilities that would make a person more skilled at a specific cognitive task and second, a variable *g* that accounts for the positive correlations across tests, representing a students' general ability (Spearman, 1904).

In 1916, Stanford University psychologist Terman took Binet's original test and standardized it using American participants (Kamin, 1995). This adapted test, the Stanford-Binet Intelligence Scale, is the standard tool used for measuring intelligence in the United States. The Stanford-Binet intelligence test uses a single number, known as the intelligence quotient (or IQ), to represent an individual's score on the test (Fancher, 1985). This score is a representation of the person's mental age versus chronological age (Terman & Merrill, 1960).

Similar to Binet, American psychologist Wechsler believed that intelligence involved a number of different mental abilities, but saw limitations in the Stanford-Binet IQ test (Wechsler, 1939). In 1955, Wechler published a new intelligence test known as the Wechsler Adult Intelligence Scale (WAIS), known today in its adapted format as the WAIS-III. Subtest scores on the WAIS-III can be useful in identifying learning disabilities, especially in cases where a low score on some areas combined with a high score in other areas may indicate that an individual has a specific learning difficulty (Kaufman & Lichtenberger, 2006). Instead of basing the test score on chronological age and mental age, as was the case with the original Stanford-Binet, the WAIS is scored by comparing the test taker's score to the scores of others in the same age group. Kaufman & Lichtenberger (2006) specify that Wechler also developed two different tests specifically for use with children: the Wechsler Intelligence Scale for Children (WISC) and the Wechsler Preschool and Primary Scale of Intelligence (WPPSI), which are the common today for intelligence testing in elementary education.

Although identification of giftedness in students was originally dependent on the aforementioned intelligence tests, more current theories suggest a broader conceptualization of intelligence (Neisser, 1979), which is what the original creators of these intelligence tests had envisioned and laid the foundation for.

Review of the Previous Literature

Giftedness

The current federal definition of gifted students was originally developed in the 1972 Maryland Report to Congress, and has been modified several times since then. The current definition, which is located in the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, is: Students, children, or youth who give evidence of high achievement capability in areas such as intellectual, creative, artistic, or leadership capacity, or in specific academic fields, and who need services and activities not ordinarily provided by the school in order to fully develop those capabilities (National Association for Gifted Children, 2008).

Every gifted child is different, in the same way every child is different. This is part of the reason why there have been so many definitions of giftedness. Initially, giftedness tended to emphasize high intelligence; more recently, gifted definitions have embraced a broader understanding to include many domains of ability (Gross, Sleap & Pretorious, 1999). Most recently, researchers have suggested that giftedness could include significant advancement in a domain that is highly valued within a society or culture (Kirschenbaum, 1995; Porter, 1999). Gross's (1999) understanding of the

concepts of giftedness is useful as it can be interpreted within the classroom environment. He states that gifted children have the potential for unusually high performance in at least one area and that gifted children have capacity to think clearly, analytically, and evaluative, which is a prerequisite for high performance in any area (Gross et al., 1999).

In this paper, gifted students are defined as those students who demonstrate high levels of ability in one or more areas. They are also children who have been identified by their teachers as being gifted.

Characteristics of Gifted Children

To provide appropriate education for gifted children, it is important to understand the characteristics of giftedness. A review of the literature reveals that gifted individuals exhibit high levels of functioning in the cognitive, affective, physical, and intuitive areas (Clark, 2002; Davis & Rimm, 2004; Karnes & Bean, 2001). Intellectual processing integrates all of these, but individuals vary in the degree to which they are exhibited and no one child has all of these characteristics. The following items are a synthesis of common characteristics of gifted students from the literature.

The cognitive area is logical, rational thought processing characterized by:

- An extraordinary quantity of information
- An unusual capacity for processing information at an accelerated pace
- Persistent, goal-directed behavior
- High levels of abstract thought

- Flexibility of thought
- Rapid acquisition of new language

The affective area is the social/ emotional interaction expressed by:

- Unusual sensitivity to the environment
- Empathy and high levels of awareness of the expectations and feelings of others
- Early development of idealism and a sense of justice
- Emotional intensity
- High expectations of others

The physical/ sensory area is characterized by:

- Heightened sensitivity to light, sound, touch, smell, and taste
- Asynchrony, the unusual discrepancy between physical and intellectual development
- High energy, alertness, and eagerness that might be misdiagnosed as hyperactivity disorder
- A tendency to avoid physical activity in favor of intellectual pursuits

The intuitive area is expressed through non-linear reasoning characterized by:

- Creative approaches and inventiveness
- Insightfulness leading to leaps in understanding
- Curiosity
- Sensitivity to aesthetic qualities

- Interest in the future
- Ability to predict

Some gifted students have characteristics that can act as a barrier to success and their achievement of positive self-efficacy:

- Lack of organization
- Extensive daydreaming
- Failure to complete work
- Argumentativeness
- Challenge to authority
- Challenge to assignments that seem pointless to the student
- Keen sense of humor that may not be understood
- Inability to prioritize interests that can result in mediocrity
- Emotional intensity
- Perfectionism

Social and Emotional Needs of Gifted Children

As the extensive list of aforementioned traits suggests, giftedness affords children advantages, but it can also cause unique problems. In addition, it exemplifies that the definition of giftedness based solely on IQ is obsolete. Social and emotional factors are prevalent and must be addressed in order for a child to flourish and develop self-efficacy.

Gifted students go through the same developmental stages as other children; however, gifted students developmental stages generally occur much earlier (Webb, Gore, & DeVries, 2006). Students experience unique social and emotional needs are somewhat connected to their accelerated and more complex intellectual development (Coleman & Cross, 2001). Adderholt & Goldberg (1999), Delisle & Galbraith (2002), Neihart, Reis, Robinson & Moon (2002), Silverman (1993), and Webb, et al. (2006) suggest the following social and emotional needs of gifted students:

- Asynchrony- uneven development such as having their cognitive abilities surpass their motor or emotional development
- Difficult peer-relations- sometimes resulting in social isolation or being seen as odd or weird, "know-it-all" or bossy by their same-age classmates
- Unusual emotional and physical sensitivity- often accompanied by heightened empathy, deep concern for global issues, such as war and hunger, which may in turn lead to frustration and/or depression due to the students' perceived inability to effect change
- Imposter Syndrome- awareness of their differences and believing that, "I am not as smart as everyone seems to think. If I am not careful, people will find out that I am really not gifted."
- Multi-potentiality- often gifted children have several advanced abilities and have difficulty deciding on which idea or ability they wish to pursue. They may

immerse themselves in diverse activities to an almost frantic degree. This places stress on themselves and their families.

- High frustration with unchallenging curriculum- preventing academic or intellectual growth and a loss of essential academic skills that will be needed later to succeed at advanced study.
- Perfectionism- sometimes taking the form of unrealistically high expectations of themselves, resulting in limited risk-taking for fear of failure, or feeling that their self-worth is dependent on their high, often unattainable achievement, and a tendency to be highly self-critical

Perfectionism

Gifted students often exhibit some degree of perfectionist traits. Perfectionist gifted students are highly self-critical, have high expectations of themselves and others, and have low levels of tolerance when their expectations are not met (Christopher & Shewmaker, 2010). Perfectionism may lead to low self-efficacy because these students tell themselves, "I should already know how to do this." This causes them to limit their academic risk taking.

Perfectionism in previous literature is not entirely considered negative. It has been classified as healthy or unhealthy. With healthy perfectionism, students are reflective, agreeable, extroverted, conscientious, and have high personal standards. With unhealthy perfectionism, students have a fear of failure and anxiety about making errors; have extremely high standards and perceive excessive expectations and negative criticism from

others; are sometimes disagreeable and not motivated to do work; have low frustration tolerance; and often have doubts about their own actions (Adderholdt & Goldberg, 1999; Callard-Szulgit 2003; Delisle & Galbraith 2002; Neihart et al., 2002; Speirs Neumeister, Williams & Gross, 2009).

Students may begin to perceive their self-efficacy as contingent upon their high intellectual level. Gifted students may interpret failure as an indication that they are not as intelligent as previously though and, consequently, not as worthy. They may strive for perfection in an attempt to preserve their self-worth (Kamin & Dweck, 1999).

Self-Regulation

The concept of motivation as a characteristic of self-regulated learners has been widely discussed by educators and many would agree that motivation is the difference between potential and performance (McNabb, 1997). The following is a synthesis of reasons why gifted students might not realize their potential (Grambo, 1994; Hoekman, McCormick & Gross, 1999; Mares, 1994; McNabb, 1997; Porter, 1999):

- As schoolwork becomes more challenging, some students might believe they lack the necessary study skills and thus fall “behind”.
- Students whose self-esteem flows from their outward show of giftedness might give up when they cannot always shine.
- Schoolwork that is below their capabilities or is monotonous results in a lack of motivation.

- Students who are required to work consistently in groups with no intellectual peers can become unmotivated.

Self-Efficacy

Previous research has found that some gifted students lose, to varying degrees, their enthusiasm for learning and their courage to speak out and display their abilities. Research (Arnold, 1995; Bell, 1989; Cramer, 1989; Hany, 1994; Perleth & Heller, 1994) has indicated that some gifted students begin to lose self-confidence in elementary school and continue this loss through college and graduate school. These students may grow to increasingly doubt their intellectual competence, perceive themselves as less capable than they actually are, and believe that others can rely on innate ability while they must work harder to succeed (Edins, 2010).

Buescher, Olszewski, and Higham (1987) found gifted boys and girls were more alike than peers not identified as gifted except in one critical area- the recognition and acceptance of their own level of ability. Interviews with middle school gifted females revealed that girls avoid displays of outstanding intellectual ability and search for ways to better conform to the norm of the peer group (Callahan, Cunningham, & Plucker, 1994).

Statistical Information

According to the National Center of Education Statistics (2010), in 2006, 3,236,990 students in the United States were identified as gifted and talented. Of those, 579,000 are male and 1,657,990 are female. 2,191,210 are white, 296,150 are black, 414,060 are

Hispanic, 304,220 are Asian/Pacific Islander, and 31,360 are American Indian/Alaska Native.

GATE programs in California are operated in approximately 800 districts located in all 58 counties. There are over 480,000 public school students that have been identified as gifted and talented in the state (California Department of Education, 2012).

According United States Census Bureau (2011), more children now are taking honors or advanced placement classes. From 1998 to 2009, the percentage of children ages 12 to 17 enrolled in gifted classes climbed from 21 percent to 27 percent.

Administrative Records

The Gifted and Talented Education (GATE) program, authorized by Education Code (EC) sections 52200-52212 provides funding for local educational agencies (LEAs) to develop unique education opportunities for high-achieving and underachieving pupils in California public elementary and secondary schools that have been identified as gifted and talented. Special efforts are made to ensure that pupils from economically disadvantaged and varying cultural backgrounds are provided with full participation in these unique opportunities.

LEAs may establish programs for gifted and talented pupils consisting of special day classes, part-time groupings, and cluster groupings. GATE curricular components are required to be planned and organized as integrated differentiated learning experiences within the regular school day and may be augmented or supplemented with other

differentiated activities related to the core curriculum, including independent study, acceleration, postsecondary education, and enrichment. For all programs for gifted and talented pupils, including those programs for pupils with high creative capability and talents in the performing and visual arts, each participating LEA shall concentrate part of its curriculum on providing GATE pupils with an academic component and, where appropriate, with instruction in basic skills.

Report from an Expert

This narrative summarizes the interview with Sylvia B. Rimm, conducted by Michael Shaughnessy, the Editor-in-Chief of the non-profit organization Supporting Emotional Needs of the Gifted (Shaughnessy, 2010). Sylvia B. Rimm, PhD., is a psychologist, director of Family Achievement Clinic in Cleveland, Ohio, and is a clinical professor at Case Western Reserve School of Medicine. She has authored books on the topic of perfectionism in gifted children.

There is a fine line between excellence and perfection. When teachers are excited and proud of our students' performance, student work is described as perfect and is awarded an A+ or 100%. In fact many gifted children go several years without the experience of making mistakes in school. Being perfect, right, and the smartest easily becomes part of a gifted student's self-efficacy, a concept developed by a combination of who they are and what the important adults and peers in their lives expect of them. Gifted children deliver excellence, and it becomes both a good and a bad habit- good when they

strive for excellence; and bad when they cannot tolerate mistakes or criticism, or when their fears of a less than perfect performance hinder their academic self-efficacy or prevent their performing at all.

When perfectionism interferes with productive achievement and a happy outlook on life, it affects self-efficacy. Gifted students are often perfectionists. They have an extreme self-concept- they view themselves as either "A" students or failures. Some gifted students cannot even see a reason to do an assignment if they do not think they can get an A. At times, their academic self-efficacy, positive or negative, may even depend on their belief in themselves that they can earn that A.

Educators of gifted students can assist in helping students overcome their perfectionism and achieve positive self-efficacy in the following practical ways:

1) Praise student effort. For example, commenting that a child is good at problem solving rather than saying he or she is the smartest or the best student helps children view their intelligence as a trait that depends on their effort.
2) Help students feel accomplished when they have done their best, not necessarily when they have done the best compared to others.
3) Read biographies about successful people who have made mistakes and experienced failure. Emphasize that failures and rejections do not negate success or intelligence. Ask children how they think those successful people must have felt when they were failing. As students discover how others stayed motivated

despite failures, they begin to find their own strategies for handling disappointments.

4) Model a sense of humor in regards to mistakes. Teachers laughing at their own mistakes or expressing their own frustration and moving forward demonstrate to students that even adults and teachers are not perfect all of the time!

Chapter 3 Method

Introduction

The nature of the research question was important in determining the methodological approach to gathering data. This research follows a research approach as described by Patten (2009). My research approach is a non-experimental, qualitative design that implements interview protocol.

Participants

My sample is a sample of convenience of purposive volunteers. The sample is of convenience for I interviewed teachers I had access to within my school district. The volunteers were purposive because I interviewed teachers who were experts on the research topic based on experience. My sample includes both teachers of various after-school GATE classes as well as mainstream classroom, general education teachers who have students in their class who have been identified as gifted.

Data Gathering Strategies

I conducted in-depth, open ended interviews to collect information. I had an interview format with specific questions that were administered in a similar fashion with all participants, but the interview was not limited to pre-determined research questions. The participants were given the opportunity to expand on topics they perceived as meaningful.

Unscripted follow up questions were added if it was determined the responses would add to the participant's depth or clarity of information.

Interview Protocol:

1. How would you describe a gifted student? What social and emotional characteristics are common amongst these students?
2. What are your thoughts on the importance of fostering self-efficacy in gifted students? In what ways, positive and negative, have you observed gifted students' academic self-efficacy?
3. In what capacity have you experienced perfectionism affecting gifted students' academic self-efficacy? What challenges do gifted students face in the areas of perfectionism and self-efficacy? In what way do these traits contribute to their success?
4. What advice do you have for the new teacher in a mainstream classroom about reaching his or her gifted students in regard to achieving self-efficacy? What are the most effective teaching strategies you have implemented in your class with gifted students?
5. Please elaborate on any subject that you feel is important in regards to helping gifted students develop academic self-efficacy.

Data Analysis Approach

I analyzed my qualitative information by finding common themes, similarities, and differences in participants' responses. I specifically looked for trends within the topics of gifted students' characteristics, perfectionism, self-efficacy, and effective teaching strategies that can be implemented by mainstream classroom teachers.

Ethical Standards

This paper adheres to ethical standards in the treatment of human subjects in research as articulated by the American Psychological Association (2010). Additionally, the research proposal was reviewed by my advisor and the Dominican University of California Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects (IRBPHS), and approved by my advisor.

Participants were informed of the nature and scope of the study. Participants signed an approval form agreeing to participate in the study. All were assured that confidentiality would be maintained, and that they had the option to withdraw from the study at any time without any negative consequences.

Access and Permissions

All interview participants read, agreed, and signed to the Dominican University consent form.

Chapter 4 Findings

Description of Site, Individuals, Data

I interviewed four teachers who have experience teaching gifted students. They include an after school GATE teacher, a fourth grade teacher, a fifth grade teacher, and a sixth grade teacher. All teachers teach at a 4^{th}-6^{th} grade elementary school in my home district.

Overall Findings, Themes

Characteristics

Gifted students have varied traits just as all students do. Most gifted students have a high IQ score, but some gifted students exhibit exceptional qualities in other areas besides raw intellect. Gifted students gain mastery at a much quicker pace than most students. However, motivation and maturity are huge factors that often counter-balance their intellect.

Because gifted students are bright, they are often bored easily in class and appear disengaged or distracted. When teachers do not recognize this as a boredom or attention issue, there is a possibility that these students are considered a behavior issue in class. This is a downward cycle that causes the student to suffer because the teacher then separates the student from his peers and the student's boredom and/ or attention issues increase.

Gifted students tend to be overly committed to enrichment and extra-curricular activities to the extent that they are not able to fully apply themselves in all areas. For

example, many gifted students participate in enriched curriculum during the regular school day, and also participate in a music lesson, a sport, and multiple after-school GATE classes throughout the week. They have extra instruction on a daily basis with no down time. In order to survive, these students sometimes put in minimal effort because they are spread too thin. This over involvement sometimes causes them to underachieve.

Because gifted students are so deeply interested in what they want to learn about, they tend to be big-picture thinkers, rather than detail oriented. This sometimes leads to a lack of organizational and study skills. For example, gifted students do not always see the need to "show their work" or how they found their answer when they can produce the correct answer quickly. Also, they may sometimes rush through their class work or not do their homework because they just want to get to what they are truly interested in. One teacher even described one of her extremely bright but disorganized gifted students as resembling the "absent minded professor."

Perfectionism

Gifted students who exhibit perfectionism want to be safe and perfect. As the curriculum gets harder, a teacher can help alleviate students' fear of not succeeding by making assignments non-threatening. It is important for gifted students to learn that mistakes help you learn and that teachers are proud of them when they ask questions because it shows they are interested and want to learn more. Some gifted students do not want to go above and beyond the general curriculum because they do not yet see the benefit of exploring as outweighing the guarantee of a perfect grade.

Perfectionistic gifted students also exhibit higher levels of sensitivity and approval seeking. For example, one such student would avoid a task if she was not sure what to do. She wanted to meet the expectations thoroughly and if the project or assignment was open ended and unclear, she felt lost. Therefore, enriching extension projects are a struggle for her because there is no deadline or grading rubric for her to work from.

However, not all gifted students struggle with perfectionism. In fact, many gifted students are more willing to think outside of the box and be creative. These students are not afraid to make mistakes, and in fact, are sometimes quite insensible in the types of questions they ask because they do think in such a big picture and creative way. Where perfectionistic tendencies regularly show themselves in gifted students is that they have very high expectations of others and are quick to point out others' errors, including the teacher's.

Self-Efficacy

Gifted students often lack confidence and are hesitant to start assignments or be self-directed learners. They are sometimes not as invested in school routines and become detached from classroom activities. Gifted students have difficulty socially making friends and are often impatient with their peers, projecting their high expectations on others.

When gifted students encounter a new challenge, they are often hesitant to put forward effort initially. For example, one area that can be challenging is in learning a new language. For gifted students who have a tendency to be analytically inclined and are accustomed to being successful in that way, language development is unfamiliar and uncertain territory. In this situation, their confidence falters and they may be hesitant to apply themselves if they are unsure the result will be successful.

Gifted students often lack strategies to cope with these challenges. Often their parents want to please their children and give them all the opportunities in the world which results in their children not knowing how to cope with adversities. In some instances, once a child has been identified as gifted, their parents lower their behavioral expectations of their child because they have been identified as special and unique. Consequently, a gifted student may not put forth their best effort because they believe they can just "slide by". For example, one gifted student chose to create a PowerPoint presentation as a GATE extension project. When she presented her work, it was clear that she had material in it she had copy and pasted from the internet and that the information was not in her own words as she struggled to present the concepts with mastery. When the teacher later explained to her in private that the purpose of the special projects is not to just do more work, but to actually research and present knowledge, the student understood the intention of these projects and realized her intention in completing the project was for outside affirmation from her parents and teacher.

Effective Teaching Strategies

Making the pace of the curriculum faster for gifted students is not necessarily best practice. Gifted students need less direct instruction. It is more important during teaching to expand on concepts beyond the scope of the general curriculum. Engaging in class discussions and application of materials are ways to expand curriculum. For example in math, if the class is learning about graphing x and y, gifted students may be encouraged to solve for x and y as well. Another strategy for deep learning is to expand discussions with rich academic vocabulary. For example, in language arts, during a literature analysis, it is important to gear discussion to gifted students rather than struggling students because all students will benefit by absorbing information at the level where they are academically. However, if that opportunity is never provided, their instruction is not heightened and deep learning will not occur.

Having independent, self-directed special learning projects always available as an option for gifted students is a successful way to expand curriculum, allowing students to collect or create their own data. The key is that gifted students need to be engaged in not just understanding, but creating as well. For example, early finishers who have done their best work on the class curriculum may use technology to create special projects. In the effort to make these projects meaningful, rather than just being more work, special projects are never graded and there is no deadline for completion. The purpose of these special projects is to encourage gifted students to feel excited about their learning and to

explore areas of interest. These projects are low risk, so they encourage students to be creative and explore what they are passionate about learning.

Effectively teaching gifted students means teaching deeper, not more. In fact, it is additionally important that gifted students are not be placated by just more of the same type of work because it is the gifted students who often are already very involved in many areas of school life. Many gifted students are multi-talented and participate in extra-curricular activities. Therefore, giving more homework only adds stress rather than deep learning.

It is important for teachers to truly discover what it is that engages their gifted students and what their students are passionate about. It is beneficial for teachers to discover what the student's "currency" is, meaning what is valuable to the student. For example, in the area of behavior consequences, for some students being ignored is a consequence while staying in at recess is a reward. It is the teacher's responsibility to know their students as individuals.

One of the most valuable things a teacher can do to improve a gifted student's academic self-efficacy is to avoid teaching them the answers, but to continually teach them how to discover the answers on their own. This empowers the students to feel in control of their own education and by having that responsibility; their learning becomes more personal and important to them.

Another key component is teacher-parent communication. The adults need to be aware and get involved with their student's strengths and weaknesses. Parent

involvement is essential to the development of a GATE educational plan. Meeting at conferences and regularly throughout the year are ways that the classroom teacher and parents can work together to best meet the needs of the individual GATE student.

Lastly, a key to connecting and teaching gifted students is humor. Gifted students often are capable of understanding humorous nuances and appreciate the break from their rigorous course load. Being able to have a sense of humor allows gifted students to not take their mistakes so seriously, and to have a less rigid perspective of their successes and struggles. Additionally, modeling humor shows students that learning is meant to be interesting, fun, and full of passion.

Chapter 5 Discussion /Analysis

Summary of Major Findings

I went into this study with an idea of characteristics of gifted students. After talking with teachers who work with these students, the characteristics that I had in my framework belonged more to what these teachers describe as their bright students. However, there is another layer of characteristics, a deeper level, that gifted students exhibit. These students are often multi-talented and multi-dimensional children who think critically about curriculum and the people that surround their life. They are highly sensitive to the academic and social demands that surround them, yet don't always have the skills to cope with these challenges. They need teachers who understand their unique attributes and help them to embrace who they are as they realize their own academic identities.

I had thought that gifted students would not take academic risks and that they had low academic self-efficacy. The teachers I interviewed, however, described a student who does possess academic self efficacy. What these students truly need is guidance in channeling their capabilities to a positive, creative exploratory outlet. I heard multiple teachers voice that it is not about giving these students more work to keep them busy. It is about encouraging them to become the leaders of their own education, the "captains" of their learning, and to encourage them to explore their own passions. Gifted students will always learn. The important key in early elementary school education is teaching them how to learn. Having this internal power to discover and direct one's own learning is the

most significant gift a teacher can help a gifted student develop in the journey towards academic self-efficacy.

Comparison of Findings to Previous Research

The similarities found between my research and previous literature are that gifted students have varied and multiple abilities and because so many of them want to explore areas they are passionate about, it is the classroom teacher's job is to provide an atmosphere where they can be present in the moment for their learning. Expecting a high volume of product, rather than deep and meaningful learning, weighs gifted students down and increases their likelihood to experience anxiety producing perfectionism. What causes this manifestation of perfectionism in their behavior is their difficulty attending to their present task and feeling overwhelmed by the need for everything to be right immediately and all at once. Teachers reported many gifted students exhibiting attention deficit and having difficulty attending to the task. This makes it even more important for students to set their own guidelines and for there not to be so many outside standards and teacher imposed expectations. The teacher has to truly get to know what the student is passionate about.

The differences I found within my research and the previous literature on the topic are that in the literature there was a lot of emphasis on gifted students exhibiting perfectionism, which was not the overwhelming experience of the teachers I interviewed. Also, the experience of the teachers I interviewed is that gifted students do have high

self-efficacy. This is likely due to the number one predictor of academic self-efficacy being success, and these teachers create an environment where students are driven by their own expectations of success.

Limitations/ Gaps in the Study

The limitations in my study are the small sample size of participants. Additionally I am a novice researcher in using interview techniques. Lastly, time and limited access to participants and resources left gaps in the research.

Implications for Future Research

Other studies and theoretical articles on perfectionism, self-efficacy, and gifted students have noted that a history of academic successes achieved without challenge may lead to the development of perfectionism. No studies were found, however, that have empirically examined the effect that a rigorous early curriculum may have on the incidence of self-efficacy in gifted students. Empirical studies are in critical need before generalizations regarding implications for gifted students and school programming can be recommended. Such studies are needed at the elementary-, middle-, and high-school levels to determine whether the effect of challenge on self-efficacy changes over time.

Overall Significance of the Study

This study provides classroom teachers strategies and ideas for best practices in educating gifted elementary school students. It illuminates the strengths and challenges of these

students in an effort to help teachers best connect with the children they are working with. Most importantly, it empowers teachers to help foster their students' academic self-efficacy in an effort to allow them to become inquisitive, passionate, lifelong learners. Today's gifted students need to be provided with the framework for how to learn so that they may forever enrich their learning and excel in their life's academic challenges.

About the Author

Lauren Merriman is an educator whose passion is teaching students how to learn and how to uncover the endless possibilities that learning can provide them. Her hope is that every child develops a true love for learning, believes that they have the capacity within themselves to discover anything they imagine, and have the opportunity to discover that the most important learning does not exist in the answer, but in the process of finding one.

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