Ideal Teacher Qualities as Perceived by High-Ability Students from Low Socio-Economic Backgrounds

A Study based in West Bengal

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ABSTRACTS

This study was aimed at understanding perceptions of underprivileged high-ability middle school students regarding the qualities they considered 'best' in their favourite science teachers. Almost 74 students identified from a cohort of 733 Class VIII students from five rural schools in the state of West Bengal (India) rated their best science teacher by indicating certain qualities and attributes which were enlisted in a questionnaire. Results indicate that for the concerned group of students it is far more crucial that a good teacher values their problems and is patient and understanding rather than the fact that he or she is a domain expert. Good guidance and infusion of the spirit of independent thinking in a student are also sought after virtues but on the whole it is the humane qualities which stand out because of perhaps the socio-economic background of the students concerned.

Introduction

India, the largest and most diverse democracy in the world, with a population of 1.21 billion (623.7 million males and 586.5 million females) in 2011, (Census of India, 2011) is being seen as one of the fastest growing countries in today's rapidly changing global economy. However, despite achieving all-round socio-economic progress through seven decades of its independence and modernisation in education, science and technology, improvement

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in the quality of life has been seen mostly in those Indians who are privileged and elite. There has been very little improvement of the masses who live in poverty and who face unemployment, illiteracy and caste and minority-based issues and gender biases.

With 69 per cent of its population residing in villages, nearly half of India's 16.8 million schools are situated in rural areas and cater to nearly 300 million students (Census, 2011). Government faces grave educational challenges in terms of exposure, infrastructure and teacher resources, lack of which lead to low educational status, high poverty, and less access to modern amenities (Haub and Sharma, 2006). In addition, the number of non-school going children between 6–14 years was seen to be 8.15 million in 2013 of which 50 per cent were girls. Despite significant accomplishments, the slow progress in reducing the number of non-literates continues to be a concern with national literacy rates at 74.04 per cent (Census, 2011) and youth literacy rate at 86.14 per cent (NUEPA, 2014).

Based on the principles of an egalitarian and integrated society, the Indian education system lays emphasis on equal education for all. The international agenda of Education For All (EFA) agreed through the Dakar Framework of Action (2001) has been central to the focus and implementation of educational development in India. This has strengthened the enactment of the Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education (RTE) Act 2009 that has led to overall neglect of secondary and higher education (Tilak, 2005) and 'educational excellence' has been considered an option for more privileged schools. The National Curriculum Framework (2006) does not allude to services for gifted students and participation of high ability students in gifted programs.

Neither researchers nor policy makers have given much attention on secondary and higher education of those from low socio-economic background. Instead, it is widely held that secondary and higher education is less important for social development, income distribution and equity. Those few researchers who analysed the relationship between post-primary education and development, did, however, find significant impact of education on social, occupational and economic growth (Benhabib and Spiegel, 1994) which leads to enhanced human capability and wider human freedom (Sen, 1999).

In India, the term 'underprivileged student' has a wide range of connotations from those who may belong to low socio-economic strata, ethnic and religious minorities, caste and gender to those

from remote geographical regions and poorly resourced schools. Socio-Economic Status (SES) refers to an individual's position within a hierarchical social structure, and which is an important determinant of a child's educational and health status. Poor socio-economic status often drastically affects children's success in school and children from such families seem to be less successful educationally than those coming from economically stable families. Though one in three children in India live in absolute poverty, about 70 per cent of them attend schools. But, growing up in poor households stifle their freedom to actively participate in and benefit fully from elementary school education. This deprivation is further accentuated by lack of infrastructure and human resources in the schools they attend.

Low education opportunity and low income are also closely related in a way that one is responsible for the other thus making it mutually reinforcing. The World Bank (1994, p. 9) recognises, "Poverty is not only a problem of low incomes rather it is a multi-dimensional problem that includes low access to opportunities for developing human capital and to education..." Payne (1998, p. 16) contends that poverty is, "the extent to which an individual does without resources". While poverty is generally considered in financial terms only, Payne (1998) maintains that financial resources are only a fraction of the sum totals of other resources may contribute to poverty.

Researchers have identified a significant disparity in the number of disadvantaged children who are selected for gifted programs (Baldwin, 2005; Begoray and Slovinsky, 1997; Borland and Wright, 2000; Callahan, 2005; Elhoweris, Mutua, Alsheikh, and Holloway, 2005; Naglieri and Ford, 2005; Scott and Delgado, 2005). The under representation of underprivileged students in gifted programs poses a challenge to policy makers, teachers and educational institutions.

Under-representation begins during the identification process and is largely exclusive to children of ethnic minority and low socio-economic status. However, neither the environment nor the culture in which a child is raised should preclude assumptions about intelligence, giftedness, or any other exceptionality (Bianco, 2005; Borland and Wright, 2000). Contributing factors that independently or mutually exacerbate the problem include ambiguity in defining giftedness, teachers' perceptions, under

achievement, culturally-biased assessments, singular standardised evaluations, and inadequate teacher training (Brown, Renzulli, Gubbins, Siegle, Zhang, and Chen, 2005; Davis and Rimm, 2004). Students of low-income families who are of high ability or show high potential often go unrecognised and are likely to fall behind others of similar ability due to factors associated with poverty. Despite this existing situation, Indian students continue to strive towards realising their creative goals through perseverance, hard work, their multilingual skills and their ability to thrive in less enabling environments.

For most adolescents, school is a prominent part of their life. It is here that they relate to and develop relationships with their peers and where they have the opportunity to develop key cognitive skills. They need a great deal of social and academic guidance to adjust with their own over excitabilities as well as adjust to peers in their classrooms. Since, teachers have a significant influence on this learning environment, and are critical to the success of gifted programs (Renzulli, 1968), the characteristics, skills, knowledge, and training of teachers who implement gifted programme should be the concerns of all gifted programme providers.

High ability students have academic and socio-emotional needs that arise due to their increased capacity to think beyond their years, greater intensity in response, combinations of unique interests, personality characteristics, and conflicts that are different from those of their peers. They require a differentiated curriculum with an optimal learning environment. Despite their rapidly developing capacity for higher-level thinking, most adolescents still need guidance from adults to develop their potential for rational decision making and prefer to confer with their parents or other trusted adults. With the existing Pupil-Teacher Ratio (PTR) of 1:36, it is more difficult for teachers to work with students in large classrooms. Sieving out high-ability students in this situation is possible only through looking at their grades which may leave out those children who possess high abilities but do not do well in school tests. Serving the needs of these students is virtually impossible in such situations.

Adolescent perception of teacher fairness, has been found to be associated with positive adolescent development. Hansford (1985) found qualities that made teachers of gifted students apart from others, namely; openness, flexibility, strong communication

skills, and intelligence. Other characteristics like thorough understanding of subject matter, self-confidence, a good sense of humour, organisational skills were seen as common characteristics of all effective teachers. Vialle and Quigley (2002) include insights into cognitive, social, and emotional needs, skills in differentiating curriculum, strategies that encourage higher level thinking and independent learning, possessing in-depth knowledge of subject matter, thinking creatively and possessing excellent communication skills. Another study by Walls Nardi, Von Minden and Hoffman (2002) examining perceptions of students on qualities of effective and ineffective teachers found five distinguishing dimensions, namely; (i) emotional environment, (ii) teacher skill, (iii) teacher motivation, (iv) student participation, and (v) rules and grades.

Teachers in classrooms with high ability and gifted students need to be made aware and sensitised towards their needs. They are expected to inspire, entertain, develop creativity, mould the understanding, encourage, inspire hope and imbibe rules to the learners along with their teaching. Effectiveness of teachers are not based only on their performance in the classroom setup but which includes the accountability for student learning and to develop humanitarian characteristics. A teacher is someone acknowledged as a guide or helper in the processes of learning and his/her role may vary between cultures. In education, teachers facilitate student learning, often in a school or academy or perhaps in another environment, such as outdoors. Teacher effectiveness is the degree to which a teacher achieves the desired effects upon students. It involves possessing knowledge and skills, along with his/her behaviour in the process of teaching (Dunkin, 1997). It includes characteristics like personality, attitudes as well outcomes of teacher-learning process (Kulsum, 2000).

Studies report that effective teacher qualities include ability to propel students towards developing positive self-confidence and self-esteem (Ahmad, Said, Zeb, Sihatullah and Rehman, 2013), create positive learning environments, and support students to be motivated towards success (Walls, Nardi, von Minden and Hoffman, 2002). They are seen to be capable of balancing the students' intellectual achievements and interpersonal learning in classroom (Reiman and Thies- Sprinthall, 1998). Such teachers are conscientious, trusting, adaptable, and practical, friendly, gregarious (Murray, 1990 and Sharma, 2008), warm, kind,

empathetic and understanding towards students (Yilmaz, 2011). Raymond's (2008) study suggests that effective teaching is a combination of both personality and ability factors some of which are being respectful of students, putting tremendous effort to make classes interesting, fair in evaluating, concerned about students' success, passionate for their subject, well prepared and organised and making difficult subjects easy to learn. Studies have reported that the personality types of teachers are in many ways similar to the personality types of the gifted students and who prefer abstract themes and concepts, are open and flexible, and value logical analysis and objectivity (Feldhusen, 1997; Mills 2003). However, another study with 50 Chinese teachers in Hong Kong who rated the importance of 25 characteristics and 14 competencies for teachers of gifted learners found philosophical ideals rated as most important, followed by professional predispositions. Personal attributes were rated as least important (Chan, 2001).

In view of the interesting studies across the world on the perceptions of adolescent students in general and high-ability students as a subgroup within this cohort, the following study was undertaken to see whether similar perceptions exist amongst underprivileged students who have superior academic achievements in their respective environments.

Methods and Procedures

Participants/ Subjects

Through this study, an attempt was made to assess the qualities and attributes of an ideal science teacher as expressed by middle school high-ability students from the state of West Bengal in Eastern India. Around 74 high-ability students of Class VIII from five schools that had a majority of students from low socio-economic status rated their best science teacher by indicating the presence or absence of certain qualities and attributes which were enlisted in a questionnaire.

Moderately high ability students of these five schools were those who fell in the top 15 per cent of the normal population of Class VIII students. These five schools have a significant number of first generation learners coming from financially and socially backward backgrounds. By first generation learners, we mean that these students and their siblings are the first to attend schools while their parents have never been to a school and are more or less illiterate.

Selections of 74 students were made from a population of 733 Class VIII students studying in these five rural schools. They were evaluated and selected on the basis of their performance, enthusiasm, task persistence, interest in science activities, quality of science projects as well as nominations by their teachers over a period of nearly one year. Students were not aware of teacher nomination details.

Research Questions

Some specific questions we wished to address were:

(i) Are the 12 enlisted teacher qualities equally dominant in the eyes of a Class VIII student who hails from a low socio-economic background? If not, which qualities are the most important when it comes to judging a teacher as 'best'?

(ii) Is there any significant variation in student perception of the best qualities of the teachers across disciplines, such as Mathematics, Life Sciences and Physical Sciences?

(iii) Is there any association between gender and student perception of the qualities of their best teacher?

(iv) Do the students of these five rural schools differ in their perception of qualities of their best teacher?

Data Analysis

The 12 enlisted attributes of a teacher were— (i) Good personality, (ii) Knows subject, (iii) Guides well, (iv) Patiently explains, (v) Interesting teaching, (vi) Understands students, (vii) Respects students, (viii) Values student problems, (ix) Gives lots of ideas, (x) Helps students think independently, (xi) Disciplined and (xii) Not biased. Our primary objective was to find out which attributes or qualities do students look for in their ideal teacher. However, we limited ourselves to teachers of the basic sciences and mathematics. The study was particularly significant as we considered high-ability school middle school students from a low socio-economic background.

To provide answers to the specific research questions we wished to address, we first considered the combined data where students put forward their likings and preferences as far as teacher qualities were concerned without any special emphasis on the subject taught by the teacher A chi-square test for equality of several independent Binomial proportions was carried out to see whether there was

any significant difference in proportion of students perceiving the presence of different enlisted attributes in their best or ideal teacher. The hypothesis of no difference was rejected we arranged the 12 sample proportions in decreasing order of magnitude. The top five proportions were considered and pair-wise comparison was carried out with these five proportions using the large sample test for Binomial proportions. This enabled us to gauge the relative dominance of the five most significant attributes a student perceives in his or her best teacher. A similar line of analysis was followed for the best teachers of the three basic sciences separately to see whether there was any significant variation in student perception with subject.

Cross contingency tables with gender and teacher qualities and different schools and teacher qualities were formed. The strength of association between the pair of nominal variables was assessed using Pearson's coefficient of contingency table. This enabled us to figure out if the perception of qualities of a best teacher was somehow associated with gender or schooling of a student. However, these measures would only help to understand the presence or absence of association, the causality would be the subject of further socio-economic analyses.

Results

The observed values of the chi-square test for the combined data as well as for the samples judging their Mathematics, Physical Sciences and Life Sciences teachers as best were 94.31, 37.97, 47.52 and 19.36, respectively. The first three values were significant at the 5 per cent level of significance as they exceeded the critical values of the relevant chi-square variables.

The paired comparison was therefore valid only in the first three situations where we considered the combined sample and the sample of students judging their Mathematics and Physical Sciences teacher as best, respectively. Such an analysis was not relevant for the sample of students judging their Life Sciences teacher as best as there seems to be no significant difference in the relative importance of the 12 enlisted teacher attributes in this case.

For both the combined sample as well as the sample of students judging their Physical Science teacher as best the top five sample proportions were found to be 'values students problems' (1), 'patiently explains' (2) 'interesting teaching' (3) 'helps students think independently' (4) and 'guides well' (5). For the sample of students judging their Mathematics teacher as best, there was

a slight change in the order of magnitude of the above sample proportions. They were 'values students' problems' (1) 'guides well' (2) 'interesting teaching' (3) 'patiently explains' (4) and 'helps students think independently' (5).

The observed values of the standard normal variable (τ) for the paired comparisons are presented in the following tables separately for the three cases.

Table 1
Combined Sample

Attributes	1 (values students' problems)	2 (patiently explains)	3 (interesting teaching)	4 (helps students think independently)	5 (guides well)
1.					
2.	1.37				
3.	2.13	0.76			
4.	2.60	1.14	0.37		
5.	2.44	1.87	1.11	0.73	

Table 2
Best Teacher: Mathematics

Attributes	1 (values students' problems)	2 (guides well)	3 (interesting teaching)	4 (patiently explains)	5 (helps students think independently)
1.					
2.	3.36				
3.	4.36	1.03			
4.	5.34	2.04	1.01		
5.	6.29	3.03	2.01	1.00	

Table 3
Best Teacher: Physical Sciences

Attributes	1 (values students' problems)	2 (patiently explains)	3 (interesting teaching)	4 (helps students think independently)	5 (guides well)
1.					
2.	0.09				
3.	1.81	0.97			
4.	1.99	1.15	1.90		
5.	3.21	2.30	1.35	1.17	

The figures in the tables show the observed value of the test which in each case follows approximately a standard normal distribution. Comparing these, we find that the significant pairs for the combined sample were (1, 3), (1, 4), (1, 5), (2, 3) and (2, 5). For the sample of students judging their Mathematics teacher as best, the significant pairs came out to be (1, 2), (1, 3), (1, 4), (1, 5), (2, 4), (2, 5) and (3, 5). The same for the sample of students judging their Physical Sciences teacher as best were; (1, 3) (1, 4), (1, 5) and (2, 5). This clearly indicates that the most sought after teacher attributes designated by the numerals 1–5 are again not equally important in the eyes of a typical student. It is a striking feature that in all the cases considered, it is far more important that an ideal teacher values students' problems (1) than whether he or she possesses the other significant academic skills (designated by 2, 3, 4, 5).

Karl Pearson's coefficient of contingency for gender and student perception was 0.08 and that for schooling and perception was 0.20. This points to an insignificant association between gender of a student and his or her perception regarding teacher qualities so that one may conclude for the concerned sample that male and female students share more-or-less similar views when it comes to judging their best teacher in basic sciences. However, it appears that schooling contributes, though not very significantly, to the shaping of views and perception of a student regarding the attributes of an ideal teacher. This is to some extent expected as the competence of the teachers employed in a school is very likely to impress upon the students and hence shape their views and expectation where school teaching is concerned.

Salient Points

From the numerical results, there appears to be a significant difference in the proportion of students perceiving different attributes and qualities in their best teacher when we consider the overall sample of 74 students as also the sub-samples who judge their Mathematics and Physical Sciences teacher as best. However for the group of students judging their Life Science teacher as best, all the 12 attributes appear equally significant in the eyes of the students.

The paired comparison indicates that it is far more important that a teacher values students' problems rather than the fact that he or she is a domain expert having good teaching skills, is patient

and can infuse the spirit of independent thinking in a student. Because gifted and able students have higher cognitive abilities than their peers, the quality of their academic needs are enhanced. This leads to their need to understand and master concepts that are not only advanced but require more time, patience. Also, because they are creative learners they tend to be self paced and independent, as they prefer to think according to the questions that arise in their minds and not just focus on the classroom questions. This may also be partly explained by the fact that we have based our study on a group of high-ability students from a disadvantaged background where availability of basic amenities is a vital issue and education virtually takes a backseat. It is, therefore, crucial that their teacher understands and appreciates their problems and grievances.

Patience on the part of the teacher is also a highly sought after virtue in comparison with domain knowledge and teaching skills. However, for students who find their Mathematics teacher best, good guidance is significantly more important than patience which is perhaps explained by the nature of the subject concerned. Vialle and Tischler (2009) in their study on gifted student's perceptions of effective teachers demonstrated that gifted students preferred the personal-social characteristics to the intellectual characteristics of their teachers. Delaney (2009) determined that the five most important characteristics of teachers for a sample of 450 Canadian high school students were that teachers were knowledgeable, humorous, respectful, patient, and organised. Davis and Rimm (2004) believe that teachers of the high-ability students should possess traits, such as 'high enthusiasm, empathy, broad knowledge and maturity' (p.53). Rosemarin (2013) found a central component of successful teaching to be an ability to respond to students and found a preference for social qualities of the teacher.

Some studies noted that many high ability, creative and talented students were disliked and misunderstood by their teachers (Fleith, 2000; Reid and McGuire, 1995; Slabbert,1994; Torrance and Safter, 1986). In the light of the present study, the results of students choosing the most liked characteristics of their best teacher, it seems such students are better liked, better understood and more valued.

A weak association is observed between gender of the students and their perception of teacher qualities whereas schooling affects students' perception, albeit moderately. This result implies that the 74 students (both boys and girls) who came from disadvantaged backgrounds from different districts of West Bengal did not differ in their opinions on the qualities that they felt were strongest in their best teachers.

Conclusions and Limitations

On the basis of our sample of 74 high-ability Class VIII students from an economically disadvantaged background, we find that not all qualities and attributes of an ideal teacher are equally significant in their eyes. It is extremely important that an ideal teacher values their problems and limitations rather than the fact that he or she is a domain expert. Hailing from an underprivileged background, where availability of basic amenities is itself an issue, this kind of an expectation from a good teacher is only natural. The more a teacher understands and appreciates their problems the better it is for them. Patience is also a highly sought after virtue and so is good guidance particularly in subjects like Mathematics. The way a student perceives the qualities in his/her teachers does not seem to depend on the gender of a student but definitely to a certain extent on his/her schooling. Schooling goes a long way in exposing a student to competent and well-trained teachers and that definitely shapes the thinking and perception of a student.

The main limitation of our present study is that the sample size is not so large so that all conclusions drawn may be somewhat empirical in nature. Repeating this kind of a study with a larger sample may reveal other interesting and may be different features.

Further, a similar study with students from a privileged set-up can reveal whether and how perception and views of students are affected by their socio-economic background. This should give insight into the relationship between socio-economic status of students and their perceptions. A result indicating a significant effect of socio-economic status on a student's perception, would suggest that underprivileged students in India have unique needs from their teachers. However, findings of more privileged students of India sharing similar views with under-privileged counterparts would send an important message to the teachers who teach gifted students from both marginalised and privileged segments

of the Indian society. Also, the needs of underprivileged students would be better understood, in terms of their expectations from their teachers, and in comparison to better privileged students. Orientation and training courses for teachers could then be tailored to meet the needs of students accordingly.

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