Chapter 12

Jen’s Story: How Being Gifted and Talented Affects a Teacher

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ABSTRACT

This chapter describes the experiences of a first grade teacher who was classified as gifted and talented during her school years. Currently, she teaches classes with a diverse group of students (e.g., English language learners, gifted and talented students). Adopting a qualitative case study method, the authors conducted an in-depth interview with the teacher and share her story related to how her giftedness affects and enhances her professional work as an educator. Further, this chapter illustrates the teacher’s story related to her personal interactions and relationships. Finally, based on the literature, implications for other educators who are gifted and talented are discussed.

INTRODUCTION

In this chapter, we first share a brief overview of what it means to be a gifted and talented individual based on the literature. Next, we describe methods and data analysis used to obtain the information. Third, we share a story of a teacher who was identified as gifted and talented as a child. She will be called Jen (pseudonym) throughout the chapter. Currently, Jen teaches students who are gifted and talented, and also has English language learners (ELLs) in her classes. Her perceptions on how being gifted affects her perspective as a teacher, a mother, and a friend are included. Finally, we conclude this chapter with insights for other teachers in the field who are also gifted and talented gained as a result of reflecting on Jen’s story.

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BACKGROUND

Within the literature, many authors have described various traits or characteristics associated with individuals identified as gifted and talented. While examining all of these is beyond the scope of this chapter, a few simple characteristics should be described to provide a context for the case study, Jen’s story. A child may display signs of giftedness by achieving developmental milestones earlier than peers, advanced abilities in subject areas (e.g., language, math), and/or displaying superior memory abilities (Perrone, Wright, Ksiazak, Crane, & Vannatter, 2010). Additionally, children may display characteristics such as high levels of curiosity, creativity, and heightened social perceptions towards peers (Perrone et al., 2010). Definitions of adults who are thought to be gifted include high intelligence, a particular ability or talent within a specific area, and the ability to learn new information quickly and easily (Perrone, Perrone, Ksiazak, Wright, & Jackson, 2007). Additional signs of giftedness may include a high speed of task completion, high energy, high morality, high levels of intuition, and abstract thinking abilities (Streznewski, 1999). Gagné (1995; 2000) further clarified the concept of giftedness with his description of the Differentiated Model of Giftedness and Talents. Under this model, gifts are described as innate abilities in one or more areas (e.g., intellectual, creative) that place the individual in the top 10% of his/her peers. Talents are described as the demonstrated mastery of the gifts (Gagné, 1995; 2000).

Lovecky (1986) further attempted to describe traits of gifted adults based on the literature and in observation/discussions with gifted adults. The five traits identified by Lovecky are divergency, excitability, sensitivity, perceptivity, and entelechy. Lovecky discusses how each trait can be operationalized in a positive or negative way through an individual’s interactions with others. Divergency is described as a preference for unusual or original responses. Gifted adults with strong characteristics of divergency emerge as “idea people” and as highly independent. The second trait, excitability, may be displayed by a high energy level and the ability to focus for long periods of time on a specific task. Lovecky describes individuals such as inventors as displaying high levels of excitability. The third trait, sensitivity, is displayed when individuals form deep attachments and react mainly to “feelings” in situations. Gifted adults with this trait show a great deal of empathy with others and are concerned with the morality of situations. Perceptivity, the fourth trait, is the ability to view several aspects of a situation simultaneously. Gifted adults with the trait of perceptivity seem to be able to assess people and situations rapidly. The fifth trait described by Lovecky, is entelechy. Gifted adults with entelechy seem to have an inner strength and a desire to become the best possible version of him or herself. Lovecky describes these individuals as adults who are like Helen Keller. Lovecky also discusses how these traits may produce interpersonal and/or intrapersonal conflict. For example, a divergent adult may have a hard time in group situations when the majority agrees to proceed in a different direction than the gifted adult believes they should go.

THE PRESENT STUDY

Based on the limited research on gifted and talented individuals who are teachers, we decided to conduct an in-depth interview with one individual who is gifted and talented and also teaches students who are gifted and talented. Following is a brief summary of the methods used to gather more information on the experiences of a gifted and talented adult teacher.