

How Good Is Good Enough? A Community-Based Assessment of Teacher Competencies for Gifted Students

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Abstract

One of the major challenges of addressing diversity in the classroom is to meet the needs of gifted students, which are often invisible in countries such as Chile, in which providing services for highly able students is still considered elitist. The purpose of this study was to analyze the perceptions of community members about the critical competencies of instructors who work with gifted students. Six focus groups were conducted with students, instructors, and staff members of an enrichment program for the gifted. Qualitative analyses were conducted throughout open, axial, and selective coding. Traits and competencies were grouped into three themes: knowledge, teaching, and socio-emotional characteristics. Differences were found between the perceptions of students and staff members: Whereas students' emphasis was on socio-affective characteristics, the staff highlighted the importance of content and pedagogical knowledge. The novelty and contribution of the study are related on how to recognize and acknowledge the voices of active members of a community for educational improvement. These community perceptions contributed to depict a profile of an effective teacher for gifted students, and were used to improve instructors' current performance and to design a more rigorous selection process for future teachers. The implications of the study also shed light about how to improve teacher preparation programs to meet the needs of this group of students.

Keywords

gifted education, special education, teacher competencies, gifted students, community voice, teacher traits

The belief that gifted students can be successful on their own is nowadays currently considered more a myth rather than an evidence-based claim (Bain, Bliss, Choate, & Brown, 2007). Gifted students often require support to reach their potential. Fortunately, several types of programs for gifted students have been implemented in different countries, and teachers have received preparation to address their needs.

However, preparation is not always good enough and teachers are not equipped to face the needs of gifted students in different contexts; this preparation is particularly deficient in contending with the cultural and/or socio-economic differences gifted students might bring (Kaplan, 2012). Because each context is different, there is no certainty that any given approach to teaching will have the desired impact on students (Timperley, Wilson, Barrar, & Fung, 2007). In the words of Darling-Hammond and Snyder (2000), “formulas for teaching that do not take account of students' experiences and needs are less and less successful” (p. 523). In the literature of giftedness, a large body of research exists concerning the characteristics and competencies of teachers for the

gifted (Hansen & Feldhusen, 1994), and diverse teaching models also have been created to meet this population's needs (Maker & Schiever, 2005). However, these models put an emphasis on the “shoulds” regarding the instruction provided for gifted students (Hertzog, 1998). The main actors in this process—students, teachers, and administrators—are not always consulted about their experiences and what matters to them in the teaching and learning process. Without the views of all of the community, including students, the picture of the educational process is incomplete (Cook-Sather, 2002). Some researchers have found that the school systems and teachers can benefit greatly by listening to the unique perspectives of members of the school community,

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especially students, who can be effective informants of their educational process (Mitra, 2004).

The purpose of this study was to incorporate the voices of various members of a learning community, not only as primary informants of their teaching and learning experiences but also as individuals who have an active role in this community, whose perceptions matter, and can, therefore, exert a direct influence on the educational and administrative levels and become partners in decision-making processes. The goal was to complement the existing dialogue on teacher competencies for the gifted by considering the viewpoints of all the participants through enquiry (Schultz, 2012), to include the voices of gifted individuals and educators into the gifted education discourse (Mendaglio, 2003). Thus, the significance of the study was to incorporate an important piece to the discussion of teacher competencies: the voices of those community members who actively participate in programs for the gifted.

Background

Gifted Students as Learners

Gifted students differ in the type and level of their abilities (Feldhusen, 1982), and they do not share the same learning characteristics (Hertzog, 1998). However, compared with their non-gifted peers, they do present unique learning needs that cannot be disregarded (Stepanek, 1999), and researchers have found significant differences between the learning styles of these two groups of students (Kahyaoglu, 2013).

Gifted students' learning needs. Learning styles and personality traits of gifted students, taken as a whole, tend to display certain characteristics that identify these students (Thomson, 2010). Kerry (1983) proposed grouping these needs into three categories: cognitive (related to several complex cognitive processes), social (relationships), and affective (intrapersonal preferences).

Cognitive. Researchers who conducted longitudinal studies have found that gifted students have a tendency to establish complex relationships between ideas; to enjoy theory, such as abstract concepts; to be more open and flexible; and to gravitate toward logical analysis and objectivity (Mills, 2003; Oakland, Joyce, Horton, & Glutting, 2000). Dunn, Dunn, and Price (1989) found certain unique traits among these students, such as feeling responsible about their own learning, preferring kinesthetic learning, having a preference for lack of structure, liking independent learning, and disliking passive listening. Other researchers have found that gifted students enjoy problem-solving activities (Gadanidis, Hughes, & Cordy, 2011), questioning given information, experiments, exploration, creating alternate solutions, and generating original ideas (Johnsen, 2004).

Social. Gifted students' interactions with their immediate context are not always easy and straightforward, mainly because they are not always accepted and feel different from their peers. Also, due to their asynchronous development (i.e., discrepancy between cognitive and socio-emotional development), gifted students can be at risk of social alienation (Silverman, 2002). According to Cross (1997), the social needs that arise out of the interaction between the gifted student and his or her environment can include feeling they are accepted by others, being with other gifted students, and being acknowledged for their achievements.

Affective. Several affective and personality traits of gifted students have been investigated over the years; however, they must be analyzed, not in isolation, but in the context of how they relate to the students' cognitive characteristics and the interactions with the social environment. Even though some researchers have taken polarized stands regarding the manifestation and intensity of the socio-emotional needs of gifted students, there seems to be some agreement about periods, such as adolescence, that are critical in the socio-emotional development of gifted students.

Successful Teachers of the Gifted

The critical role of the teacher in nurturing and addressing gifted students' potential is undeniable, and early studies have found that teachers do make a difference (Cromptley & McLeod, 1986). According to the characteristics of gifted students, several researchers have investigated the "ideal" competencies of the teachers who work with this population to enhance their learning experiences. For this research, competency will be understood as a cluster of resources that are mobilized and reorganized by the individual (knowledge, procedures, and attitudes) to respond in an appropriate manner to a situation, in a given context, which means "knowing how to act" (Jonnaert, 2002; Le Boterf, 2002; Tardif, 2006). These teachers' resources, also known in education as *professional competence*, have been widely studied in the field of teacher education. One of the prominent authors in this field is Lee Shulman, who proposed a paradigm to understand teachers' professional knowledge (Kleickmann et al., 2013; Shulman, 1986). Several authors have investigated Shulman's categories and even though there has been no agreement about the relationship between domains, they can be grouped into four main groups: subject matter knowledge (also known as content knowledge or CK), pedagogical knowledge, pedagogical content knowledge (PCK), and knowledge of the context (Park & Oliver, 2008). For this study, we particularly focused on CK and PCK as core constructs that can be identified by those actively participating in an educational community. Content knowledge was defined following Shulman's (1986) conceptualization: "the amount and organization of knowledge per se in the mind of teachers" (p. 9), that is, a complete and profound understanding of the subject matter. PCK was

understood as the extensive array of strategies employed by teachers to promote students' understanding of a subject matter, also considering contextual limitations that can be present in the teaching and learning process (Webb, 2013).

A teacher becomes progressively competent when exposed to pre-service education and professional development (Darling-Hammond, Wei, Andree, Richardson, & Orphanos, 2009). Researchers in the field of giftedness have found that the quality of teacher preparation is critical, because it can transform teachers' preconceived ideas of giftedness (Kagan, 1992). However, several investigations have shown that pre-service training in gifted education is insufficient (Rowley, 2012) and that in-service professional development opportunities in the field are weak and not necessarily connected to classroom implementation (VanTassel-Baska, 2006).

Teaching practices. The discussion about teacher competences has revolved around the concept of teacher effectiveness (Mills, 2003). Although the teachers of the gifted share many characteristics with teachers in regular classrooms, researchers have found that there are critical aspects that differentiate both groups in terms of providing opportunities to enhance students' learning experiences. Hong, Greene, and Hartzell (2011), for example, in a comparative study of teachers for the gifted and teachers in regular classrooms, found significant differences between both groups: Teachers of the gifted reported more sophisticated epistemological beliefs regarding knowledge and learning, were more oriented toward learning goals, and paid less attention to performance goals than their peers in regular classrooms. Furthermore, teachers of the gifted had a preference for structure in the classroom environment and for using materials that fostered student learning. However, teachers in regular classrooms were focused on the results of standardized tests.

VanTassel-Baska (2005) found that the ideal profile of a teacher for the gifted included competencies such as the mastery of disciplinary content knowledge, a positive interaction with students, and use of diverse teaching strategies. The best teaching practices included a repertoire that encompassed student-centered teaching, use of stimulating questions, and classroom management, among others.

Teacher characteristics. In identifying effective teaching practices for gifted students, teacher competencies are not the only factor to consider. In fact, some authors have stated that whereas competencies can be learned or acquired throughout teaching experiences, other characteristics are equally important and necessary for an optimal learning process (Feldhusen & Hansen, 1988). Eyre et al. (2002), in a study with teachers from the United Kingdom, found that teachers' insights about the needs of gifted children were relevant when working with this population. These dispositions included being empathetic with students' needs, having high

expectations, displaying humor, encouraging gifted students in the same way as students in regular classrooms, ensuring a safe classroom climate for students, and providing challenging learning experiences.

Consistent with Eyre et al., Vogl and Preckel (2014) also found that the social environment in which learning occurs—the classroom climate—can also be a critical component influencing gifted students' experiences as learners. In their study, a positive classroom climate was related to better attitudes toward school and less disruptive behaviors. An adequate climate also had a positive effect on gifted students' well-being and overall satisfaction with their academic experiences in schools.

Gentry, Steenbergen-Hu, and Choi (2011), in a mixed-methods study of student-identified exemplary teachers, found that teachers who had the most valuable competencies had the following characteristics: had a genuine interest in students and built strong relationships with them, set high expectations and had high standards for their students, maintained a good classroom climate and had a good time with their students, and had passion toward their teaching and their students.

Another set of findings regarding teacher characteristics is related to the close relationship that exists between teacher and student characteristics. Mills (2003) found a considerable match between the personality types of both students and teachers, concluding that effective teachers displayed characteristics such as openness, flexibility, creativity, and overall preference for intuitive processing.

Community Voice and Engagement in Assessing Educational Practices

The concept of voice arises from the emerging need to incorporate different actors in understanding practices that occur in educational settings, with the goal of empowering, incorporating their opinions and perceptions, and acknowledging the importance of community voices for democratic participation in the pedagogical process (Freire, 1968). Even though students, parents, and teachers are the main actors in educational contexts, few investigations have taken their voices into account, especially regarding the experiences of teaching and learning (Budnick, 2013).

Student voice. The concept of student voice has been investigated related to the forms in which students' opinions and involvement can produce changes in the school context (Flutter & Rudduck, 2004). In the field of giftedness, some researchers have investigated students' views and perceptions of teacher quality and effectiveness. However, these studies have been conducted exclusively for research purposes and not necessarily as part of educational decision-making processes; this was the ultimate goal of the current investigation: incorporating student voices to foster a participatory needs assessment (Wang & Burris, 1997).

Vialle and Quigley (2002) found that students had a preference toward cognitive and socio-emotional characteristics of teachers, such as enthusiasm, sense of humor, good communication skills, and learning from errors. In other studies, Vialle and Tischler (2009) indicated that when gifted students are forced to make a choice about their teachers' characteristics, there was a tendency to prefer personal-social characteristics to intellectual ones. Despite these initial preferences, when students answered an open-ended question, the authors found more balance between socio-affective and cognitive characteristics, suggesting that there is a more complex relationship between them given that students tended to combine both elements in their answers.

Gentry, Rizza, and Owen (2002) conducted a study with 1,250 gifted students about what teachers reported doing in their classes and what students perceived had occurred in them. They found discrepancies between both groups, especially regarding challenges presented by teachers. The researchers emphasized the need to "hear both sides of the story," which includes incorporating both teacher and student voices to fully understand what happens within the classroom.

J. Gallagher, Harradine, and Coleman (1997) found that even if the students encountered some degree of challenge in their classrooms, repetition and a slow pace were aspects that did not favor their learning and, therefore, demanded from their teachers more complexity, practical activities, and the opportunity to reflect individually. Kanevsky and Keighley (2003) found that many of the students were bored and their perceptions of teachers and strategies were similar to the ones found by Gallagher et al. such as repetition. When asked about their preferences, choice appears to be a critical aspect that enhanced the students' learning experiences. Márquez and Martínez (2011), in a study of gifted students' characteristics and perceptions of their educational settings, also found that boredom was constantly mentioned by students, who demanded better and innovative teaching practices in which they could use their time productively.

Conejeros-Solar, Gómez-Arizaga, and Donoso-Orsorio (2013), in a qualitative study on Chilean gifted students' perceptions about teacher characteristics, found that (a) students were able to conduct detailed assessments of their teachers; (b) students' perceptions were consistent with what other researchers have found about teacher effectiveness, such as practicality, flexibility, and pace; and (c) students also valued socio-emotional characteristics such as closeness, empathy, and trust. Olivares et al. (2014) found similar results when analyzing the perceptions of students who participated in a Chilean enrichment program: Students had a strong preference for interactive lessons and teaching practices that fostered flexibility.

Community voice. From early research in the field, the value of community-based approaches has been highlighted as relevant to improve teaching and learning practices for gifted

students (Coutant, 1961; Pinellie, 1973; VanTassel-Baska & Kulieke, 1987).

Matthews and Kitchen (2007) conducted a study to assess the implementation of gifted programs within three different schools. They found similarities between teachers and students' responses and concluded that both of them were able to inform about the strengths of the programs (e.g., a challenging academic environment), the changes that could be implemented (e.g., using varied teaching methods, more professional development for teachers), and the relationship the programs had with the school community (e.g., a helpful relationship).

These findings suggest that students and educators can be a valuable resource for understanding classroom encounters and student learning, through the analysis of their narrated experiences. Narratives "can reveal truths of the human experience" (Riessman, 2008, p. 10) and provide the individuals with a sense of uniqueness and purpose based on different experiences (Singer, 2004). In the field of gifted education, in which a tradition of quantitative research exists, a qualitative approach can provide richness and depth to the discussion. Prior (2011), in her analysis of student voice in gifted education, stated "the insider perspective is urgently needed" (p. 125).

The purpose of this study was to recognize narratives to produce meaningful knowledge. We investigated how a co-constructed or community-based approach, in which the views of students, practitioners, and teachers converge, can help to outline a profile of characteristics and competencies for teachers who work in an extracurricular enrichment program for gifted students in Chile.

The question that guided the study was the following:

Research Question 1: What were the teacher competencies and characteristics identified as critical by the members of the community of an extracurricular enrichment program for the gifted?

Method

Context

The Chilean educational system. Three types of schools can be found in the Chilean educational system: public, semi-private, and private. Seven of 10 students from public schools come from the 40% of the population with the lowest socioeconomic status (SES; González, Mizala, & Romaguera, 2002). Chilean schools have a unique national curriculum dictated by the Ministry of Education. This national curriculum includes a *minimum curricular content* that needs to be addressed by each school to assure that every student is prepared to face high school and college demands.

Programs for the gifted. A decree promulgated in 2012 mandated the provision of special education services

Table 1. Characteristics of the Sample.

	Gender	Role in BETA Program	Education
Students	4 M 2 F	Student representatives	3 elementary 3 secondary
Coordinators	1 M 4 F	Student support	3 psychologists with master's degrees 1 special education teacher
Managerial team	2 F	Director and curricular director	1 psychologist with a PhD in education 1 language arts teacher with a PhD in literature
Teachers	4 M 1 F	Elementary and secondary BETA instructors	2 teachers with master's degrees 4 teachers with BAs

within schools as compulsory. However, it did not include services for gifted education. The only way the Chilean Ministry of Education has secured education for the gifted, since 2007, is through economic support for university-based extracurricular enrichment programs that exist in six of the 15 regions of the country. These programs serve students mainly from public schools under the premise that this population has fewer opportunities to develop their potential.

The BETA Program is part of the university-based program network located in the city of Valparaíso, Chile (Programa BETA, 2012). The program was created 10 years ago and serves a population of approximately 270 gifted students per year from Grades 7 to 12. Students attend the program on Fridays and Saturdays. Each semester they have the opportunity to choose two courses and a workshop. Courses are focused on a specific topic of a discipline (e.g., *The Physics Behind Toys*) and workshops on the mastery of a specific skill (e.g., rock climbing).

Participants

Eighteen members of the BETA Program participated in this study. Consent and assent for their participation was obtained prior to the data collection process. The characteristics of the participants are summarized in Table 1.

- Elementary and secondary BETA students ($n = 6$). Regular BETA students are identified either in sixth or ninth grade. The first step is a schoolteacher nomination; the second step is an evaluation that uses a combination of different scales: the Raven Standard Progressive Matrices and a Motivation Scale locally elaborated. A purposeful sample of students was drawn for the study, in which the criteria were (a) gender representation, (b) active role within the program, and (c) age representativeness (students from elementary and secondary levels were selected).
- Coordinators ($n = 4$). All the BETA coordinators participated in the study. These are individuals who work directly with the BETA students on tasks such as organization, research, or socio-emotional support.

- Members of the managerial team ($n = 2$). The two members of the BETA administration team were part of the study. All the BETA staff were recruited through an external hiring process, except for the director who is nominated by the vice president of the university in which the program is located.
- BETA Instructors ($n = 6$). A purposeful sample of instructors was recruited to participate in the study who met the following criteria: (a) had at least 2 years of teaching experience in the program, (b) had good teacher evaluations, and (c) were committed to the program.

Parents were not included in the sample. This decision was not arbitrary; parents can be good evaluators and their voice was considered as part of the BETA community. However, in the context of this study, our goal was to gather and analyze data from those who worked and/or had *direct* experiences with teachers of the BETA Program to recall specific events or phenomena that helped explain the competencies that are critical for teaching in a program for the gifted. This research was framed within a series of activities organized by the BETA Program to design a community-based teacher profile grounded in core competencies, with the goal of recruiting future teachers that would demonstrate the critical competencies defined by the BETA community.

Instruments and Procedures

Students, coordinators, and members of the management team participated in separate focus group sessions. Teachers were divided into three distinct groups: humanities, science, and workshop instructors. A total of six focus group sessions were conducted that had a length of approximately 1.5 to 2 hr each. Participants were contacted and a consent form was signed prior to the participation in the study.

Semi-structured questions focused on the characteristics of teachers who currently work or would like to work in the BETA Program were constructed and expert judgment was used to validate the questions. The two protocols used had the following characteristics: (a) questions for the student focus group were formulated using simpler language, (b)

Table 2. Guiding Questions for the Focus Group Sessions With Teachers, Coordinators, and Management Team.

Questions
What do you understand by competency?
What is knowledge for you?
What do you think would be the basic competencies and knowledge that a BETA teacher has to have (or are indispensable)?
Which competencies and knowledge can ideally be present, but are not strictly necessary?
Which competencies and knowledge do you consider have to do with teacher traits and what are the competencies and knowledge that can be developed through training when he or she is teaching at the BETA program?

Table 3. Guiding Questions for the Focus Group Sessions With Students.

Questions
What characteristics do you think are important for a BETA teacher to have?
What happens in the classroom with BETA teachers? What do you like/dislike?
What characteristics do you think the teacher should have to have a good classroom environment?
Considering that you are gifted students, what characteristics do you think should a teacher who works with gifted students have?

questions were open in nature, and (c) protocols were flexible and allowed for emergent topics to arise from participants. The questions included in both protocols are displayed in Tables 2 and 3.

Data Analysis

Focus groups were audiotaped and data were later transcribed verbatim. Transcriptions were reviewed and an initial process of open coding was conducted separately by the two researchers using the computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software ATLAS.ti. In this phase, each researcher also created code and theoretical memos.

A second phase included three joint sessions of inductive analysis (Creswell, 2007) for axial and selective coding purposes to discuss the relationships among codes and to achieve densification and saturation of the data (Glaser, 1994). In this second phase, we focused on theory building by analyzing patterns, building categories from those patterns, and creating overarching themes. To ensure trustworthiness, we followed two criteria: (a) created a thick description of the data and (b) conducted peer-debriefing sessions during the second phase of analysis to question and justify the categories and themes.

Results

Data analysis yielded three themes related to teachers' characteristics and competencies identified by the community members of the BETA Program. However, the connotation and relevance of each theme was different for the group of students and the groups of staff members and teachers, which have been explained in detail in this section. Descriptions and examples of the themes and subthemes that emerged from data analyses can be found in Table 4. The three main themes were the following:

Theme 1: Knowledge, which referred to the type and quality of the teacher's disciplinary (subject matter) preparation.

Theme 2: Teaching, which included the transformation of content into teaching and learning strategies.

Theme 3: Socio-emotional characteristics represented in student-teacher interactions.

Theme 1: Knowledge

Students did not comment on the topic of teachers' CK or preparation; they focused on teaching strategies and socio-emotional characteristics of their BETA instructors. On the other side, one of the salient topics that emerged from the BETA staff and teachers was that instructors should have a profound knowledge of their field and be capable of acknowledging the principles and problems of that field, and the connection with other disciplines, as stated by one staff member: "It is important that the instructor has a solid knowledge of the discipline, that he is an expert in the field." Also, for this group, teachers must know the field from a theoretical, practical, and/or experimental point of view; however, they also have to show passion toward the discipline they teach.

You have to like what you teach, I mean, not only being the expert, you have to like it a lot . . . It's fantastic that you can do whatever you want and that is important, that the teacher likes what he is doing. (BETA workshop instructor)

For the members of the management team, disciplinary knowledge is crucial and relevant; however, the sharing of this knowledge needs to be rigorous, considering that teachers are working with gifted students who need to be challenged. The curriculum director, who is in charge of the continuous process of following up with instructors in BETA, stated, ". . . rigor when delivering their knowledge, when

Table 4. Main Themes and Subthemes With Definitions and Examples.

Theme	Definition	Subthemes	Example
Knowledge	Type and quality of teachers disciplinary preparation	Expertise	. . . so he has to master the content knowledge, in the particular case of mathematics, the teacher has to have a good knowledge of the field, it cannot be a person who only has a Bachelor degree (BETA teacher).
		Passion toward content	And I also think that they have to show the passion related to the discipline they teach (BETA staff member).
		Cognitive challenge	The teacher has to be demanding, he has to pose challenges to the students (BETA curriculum director).
		Interdisciplinary content knowledge	That they have an interdisciplinary view of teaching, that they have an interest in coupling with other fields (BETA science instructor).
Teaching	Theoretical and practical experience with teaching and learning strategies	Being flexible	. . . there are teachers here that have learned how to work with gifted kids, I mean, they have elaborated a work strategy and developed a special attitude to work with them, because these students are very different from university students and from the standard school student . . . the ones that cannot adjust, that cannot learn this strategy, they leave, they don't stay in the program (BETA coordinator).
		Promoting active student participation	I think the teacher also needs to consider student participation, recognizing students' previous knowledge on a topic or their opinions . . . like a constructivist approach (staff member).
		Fostering student motivation	I took a history class that was very different in the way the teachers teach it . . . we had to create an imaginary world applying historical facts . . . so I was really motivated and enthusiastic about this class (secondary female student).
Teacher characteristics	Referred to the psychological characteristics that emerge from the socio-emotional and pedagogical student–teacher interactions	Empathy	One of the things I consider important for being a teacher in this program is a commitment that can be related with empathy with the work you have to do for these students. I think that is important at a program and students level. Beta students have different characteristics and maybe for some teachers that could be complicated (BETA workshop teacher).
		Passion	Maybe in some occasions, students can ask questions that the teachers don't know how to answer, but if you really have passion for what you do, you can provide afterwards an adequate answer to the student (BETA socio-emotional coordinator).
		Reflection	And they have to be tolerant, because here in the program the teacher is constantly evaluated, and it is an opportunity where you see what you can improve to be a better teacher, and you have to accept your errors, and improve them to become a better teacher (BETA secondary student).
		Interaction with students	The ability of active listening . . . you cannot work here if you do not have the ability of active listening to your students and acknowledging what they have to say (BETA workshop teacher).

developing knowledge. It has to present a cognitive challenge for students. This is important, relevant.”

Teachers also agreed that knowledge is relevant, especially a profound knowledge of specific content that is relevant to a discipline and in which the instructor has experience or specialization. However, the instructor needs to be able to adapt to the students' academic backgrounds and be able to use interdisciplinary CK, especially when students have not had the opportunity in their school curriculum to explore certain concepts:

I think the knowledge the teacher needs to have, has to be specific, but at the same time he needs to be able to work on different areas, because some of the students' schools are oriented to the social sciences. So I need to provide examples

based on my knowledge of social sciences. (BETA science instructor)

Theme 2: Teaching

Teaching was an important element for both groups (students and staff members). When addressing this topic, they both referred to the term *didactics*, but with different connotations and meanings: For the staff members and teachers, it was related to instructional strategies, whereas for the students, they used it as an adjective when referring to a teacher who was enthusiastic and engaging. What needs to be taken into consideration is that while students discussed their ideas, they were always comparing their BETA instructors with their teachers in regular classrooms. These comparisons can

be translated into a critique of their current educational system, which the BETA students have experienced as rigid, as stated by a secondary student: “At school it’s like the teacher talks, the student writes, and it’s like a machine, a machine that writes . . .”

Being flexible. When students compared their BETA and regular school settings, the ideal BETA instructor is different from their schoolteacher because the latter rigidly structures his or her classes around the contents of the national curriculum. For the students, this teacher has no room for innovation because he or she is “forced” to cover specific CK. One of the secondary students told a story about her science teacher at her school:

She had planned her course, but they rejected it because she has to follow what the Ministry [of Education] mandates, and she had to do it differently. Her course had depth and was didactic [sic], but the government said no, because it has to be the same as in the other schools.

On the other side of the teaching spectrum, students perceived that the BETA context promoted more flexibility in their teachers. Therefore, the BETA teacher was perceived as more enthusiastic, with more freedom to deliver specific CK, and because it is a different context than the regular classroom, he or she does not have the curriculum limitations that hinder students’ learning: “at my school I get bored listening to what I already understand, but BETA is different because they tell you different things, more in-depth things” (elementary student).

For the BETA staff, flexibility was considered as important as disciplinary knowledge. For the managerial team, it was particularly critical that the teachers be open to learn about teaching strategies, because some instructors did not have a background in education: “it is important that they have flexibility, a desire to learn, in terms of how they can teach in their classrooms” (BETA curriculum director).

BETA instructors saw flexibility as being able to change direction when the development of a session is not yielding the expected results. One science teacher warns about “being attentive to the signals” from the students in the classroom. Other instructors shared their narratives about how the program and students’ characteristics required them to change their teaching practices in a positive way: from a traditional teacher-centered approach to a student-centered one. In BETA, instructors have to be able to move away from pre-established teaching schemes to modify and adapt lessons according to students’ needs and preferences, favoring depth over quantity: “I’m not saying that you are going to modify the entire syllabus, but a topic that you had planned for one session can turn into two sessions, into a tremendous cognitive and socio-affective development for the students” (humanities course instructor).

Promoting active student participation. For BETA instructors, passive learning is not an option. Gifted students need to have teachers who take into consideration students’ prior knowledge and opinions, so they can construct their own perspectives on a topic and become independent learners: “I think the teacher also needs to consider student participation, recognizing students’ previous knowledge on a topic or their opinions . . . like a constructivist approach” (staff member).

Planning meaningful instructional activities. As stated before, for students, BETA is a different educational setting from school, in which there is no pressure to deliver a curriculum and to administer standardized assessments. In this context, the activities can be planned more freely by teachers; a valuable advantage for students is when instructors are able to design activities in which they can apply the acquired knowledge to have a long-lasting learning experience:

These new activities are like . . . OK, we learned the content and now, apply it, and we do so in different ways, because the knowledge can stay in our heads, not like in school that we study for a test and it’s gone. (Secondary student)

Also, these activities need to be varied to take into account students’ interests, as stated by one female elementary student: “our teacher has us work in groups, sometimes we read, and sometimes we do fun things such as drawing, writing, we can even create our own test.”

BETA instructors and staff are aware of the fact that gifted students are capable of solving complex problems. Therefore, it is important for teachers to design activities in which students are faced with different ways and strategies to address a problem to also foster divergent thinking: “We have to let students solve problems, and the thinking process has to be absolutely divergent” (science instructor).

Fostering student motivation. According to students, the way teachers approach their classes and the strategies they implement are crucial to ignite their motivation toward learning a particular topic.

What comes to my mind is innovation, creativity, to promote student motivation . . . because if the student is faced with something new, he’s going to say yes, he’s going to be motivated and is going to like it. On the other hand, if the teacher does repetitive things, the student will be bored and tired, but if the teacher has the ability to create, innovate, the student will be motivated . . . (Secondary female student)

For the students, as well as for the staff and instructors, helping students motivate themselves is a reflection of the teachers’ own motivation toward the student and the content in which they have specialized: “The BETA teacher has to motivate the student . . . the same motivation that the teacher

has, double it, and tell the student you are good at this, this is going to help you a lot in the future” (secondary student).

For the BETA staff, the instructor who is going to teach in the program needs to have an initial motivation toward gifted education, and ideally, this motivation is sustained over time. They explained that historically, BETA instructors who were not motivated have abandoned the program: “it is a very specific field, and he or she has to be motivated, interested, wanting to become a professional who knows about this field,” said the BETA director, reinforcing this idea.

Theme 3: Socio-Emotional Characteristics

Even though the students’ discussion included different teacher competencies, students were particularly focused on teachers’ socio-emotional characteristics. They do not see the teacher as merely delivering content, but as someone who can make a difference and have a positive impact in their lives. Socio-emotional characteristics were discussed by the BETA teachers and staff but did not have the prominence and the same significance they had for the students of the program.

Empathy. As conceptualized by students, empathetic teachers not only are capable of relating to the emotions expressed by their students when facing difficult situations but also know how to treat students, acknowledging their backgrounds, their abilities, and their different ways of thinking, as stated by one male student: “I think that they need to have empathy, they have to be responsible for the topics they are going to address, because for example, there are students with different religious beliefs.” Empathy, in the interaction with the student, is translated into a profound sense of respect toward the student as an individual: “He has to be tolerant, I think, respectful of students’ ideas even if he doesn’t share them . . .” (elementary student). For the instructors, empathy also can be translated into respect. One of the workshop instructors narrated about how, throughout time, he encouraged his students to call him by his first name, and how students developed a relationship with him based on trust and acceptance: “the teacher needs to have a certain empathy, to encourage student development and accept their different realities.”

Closeness. For students, closeness is narrowly related to empathy and has three important dimensions: cognitive, affective, and physical. Cognitive closeness gives the opportunity to debate and discuss ideas that are interesting for both the student and the teacher: “Here [in BETA] you can have a debate with your teacher because you know you can reach closeness . . .” (secondary male student). Affective closeness had to do with caring for the student beyond what happens within the classroom, for example, showing interest in their personal experiences and stories: “Because despite him being your teacher, you can always talk to him. He is like a

person who is very close to you” (secondary student). Finally, physical closeness was related to the teacher being physically available for the student and not “running away” when the session ends. Students understood this proximity with their teachers not as friendship, but as a person you can count on and someone who can also learn from the student: “In BETA, teachers leave the class to buy something and you can talk to them . . . in schools they leave and you can’t reach them” (elementary student).

For BETA instructors, closeness was understood as teachers’ positive disposition toward their students: being available when they approach and developing relationships that are based on trust. One mathematics teacher stated, “it means generating trust in the student, not only in her abilities, but also that the student can initiate a conversation with me, so I can make a contribution . . .” For the BETA staff, closeness was also important, but they also emphasized boundaries, because as students are out of the school context, the limits of the teacher–student relationship might be obscured: “it is important that the teacher can establish closeness, but there are limits. It is very important for me that the person has an emotional maturity . . . that has to be present” (BETA director).

Passion. Students from the program, when referring to teacher characteristics, return to comparing their teachers in regular classrooms with the profile of the BETA teacher. This time, they see the schoolteacher as someone who has lost his or her enthusiasm toward teaching and is, therefore, monotonous and repetitive; whereas, BETA teachers tend to love what they do: “Teachers in school teach with a bad attitude, but in BETA the teacher is here because he likes it, he loves it, so he teaches us with passion, with enthusiasm” (secondary student).

For the BETA staff, passion is translated into a permanent interest toward the discipline and this characteristic needs to be evident to students, in a way that they are filled with their teachers’ enthusiasm. For the BETA director, this passion is displayed by the instructor who is an ongoing learner: “a permanent researcher who is always concerned about learning more about his discipline.”

Reflection. This domain, from the instructors and staff members’ perspectives, was related to teachers’ ability to reflect on his or her own teaching, listen to other peers or colleagues, and make adaptations if necessary. One humanities instructor recounted her experience about reflecting on her own teaching practice, as she transitioned from being extremely teacher-centered to noticing that her students were bored, which motivated a desire for change: “I am wrong, I need to change, I can’t continue this way . . . and I started to teach differently, more interactively, and the students woke up and participated in my class.” For the staff members, highly valued teachers were those who were self-critical and willing to learn from feedback: “The ability to be self-critical and to be

also open to external criticism, from informal feedback to a more formal evaluation . . . that should be part of the teachers' professional growth."

Students, who again made comparisons with their schoolteachers, considered that teachers are so concerned with the curriculum that they are afraid of making mistakes. Therefore, they adhere to the textbook and do not make room for reflection or innovation. For the students, an ideal characteristic of BETA instructors is for them to acknowledge their mistakes and improve their teaching, avoiding stagnation: "if she is wrong, she has to know why, and then improve afterwards . . . and not do it again" (elementary student). Also, they considered the process of teacher evaluation that occurs in BETA as an opportunity for the teacher to improve:

We do teacher evaluations, and the teacher can see how he can improve. They have to accept their mistakes . . . the idea is not that they feel that they messed-up, that they are bad teachers, but to improve and become a better teacher. (Secondary student)

Interaction with students. This domain involved the generation of an adequate socio-emotional classroom climate, in which the instructor shows an interest toward students' needs and characteristics, as stated by the BETA director: "Another element that I consider important for a teacher to have is a genuine interest in contributing to his or her students' development." In this climate, the teacher also displays behaviors of assertive communication, conflict resolution, leadership, cordiality, and openness.

For all the participant groups, one key aspect was creating an environment for dialogue within the classroom in which respect was essential: "To create opportunities for dialogue within the classroom, to learn to listen to what the student has to say, to show respect, to generate a climate of trust and communication" (science instructor). For the students, this environment is helpful to their learning, but the teacher needs to encourage the participation of all students: "that the teacher helps the student to get out of his capsule and invites him to participate in the discussion" (secondary student).

Discussion

The results of this study constitute an attempt to answer the question about teachers for gifted students posited in the title: *How good is good enough?* The participants responded in different ways, according to their experiences as learners, instructors, and staff members of an enrichment program for the gifted. For students, there seems to be a match between their unique characteristics as gifted individuals and the expectations they have for their teachers (Mills, 2003), which includes not only PCK competencies but also a set of socio-emotional characteristics that are critical for their engagement in the learning process. On the other side, for teachers and staff members, CK and PCK (Kleickmann et al., 2013;

Shulman, 1986) were predominant in answering the aforementioned question.

These results are consistent with previous research that has been conducted in Chile on the topic of teacher characteristics (Conejeros-Solar et al., 2013); however, a more integrative and democratic understanding can be depicted when community voices are incorporated (Freire, 1968). The educational and interpersonal relationships experienced by the BETA community provide a firsthand view that can enrich the analysis of the critical aspects needed for instructors of gifted students.

The results obtained from students and BETA staff and teachers are consistent with what authors in the field of teacher and teaching education have found, such as the importance of CK and PCK (Shulman, 1986; VanTassel-Baska, 2005). However, the analyses made by both groups who participated in the study have different implications in several realms, related to the role each has in the program; therefore, the positioning of the participants in their discourse (Frosh, Phoenix, & Pattman, 2003) and the language they use (i.e., experiential vs. technical) is dependent on the role and experiences that they have had in the program.

Staff members of the programs and teachers were the ones who mostly referred to CK as central for current and future teachers of the program. They perceive the teacher as being an expert, which translates into having a profound knowledge of the field (Kleickmann et al., 2013) and being deeply engaged with the content that he or she delivers to gifted students. This conceptualization, therefore, depicts a teacher who has developed a certain expertise over time and has been actively involved in his or her disciplinary field. Furthermore, one aspect that for participants cannot be separated from CK is passion. For students, passion was understood as a teacher who is deeply engaged with the content and his or her students. As for teachers, passion was related to being "deeply in-love" with the content he or she has to deliver (Gentry et al., 2011).

Regarding pedagogical competencies or PCK, the views of both study groups were different based on their experiences. Students tended to compare BETA instructors with their schoolteachers, and the overall conclusion is that the latter have to adhere to a very rigid national curriculum with no space for innovation, whereas BETA instructors can act freely because of a learning environment that is open to creativity and allows teachers to be flexible and innovative with his or her teaching practices. This is consistent with the findings of Márquez and Martínez (2011), who state that the teacher "has to do things different from average because his students are different too" (p. 39). For teachers and staff, flexibility is situated in the instructor, and they define it as being capable of creating diverse learning opportunities for students, being innovative in their teaching methods, and adapting to students' needs and interests (VanTassel-Baska, 2005).

Concerning teacher characteristics, both groups consider cognitive and socio-emotional aspects as essentials. Although students prioritized socio-affective traits, they did not neglect cognitive components, which is consistent with the results found by Vialle and Tischler (2009). One of the salient socio-affective traits is closeness, a construct defined by students as a proximity in which teachers challenge and provide them with opportunities to explore new ideas, listen actively, and are open and approachable. This is similar to what Gentry, Steenbergen-Hu, and Choi (2011) found in their study of exemplary teachers, referring to the importance of the teacher genuinely “connecting” with their gifted students. We interpret the construct of closeness, especially affective and physical, as particular of the BETA community where emotional bonds have been an implicit but critical aspect of the organization. Also, from a cultural stance, there is the Chilean (and Latin American) culture that places high value on physical demonstrations of affection.

For the BETA staff and teachers, a teacher’s disposition to promote a positive and nurturing classroom climate was seen as critical interpersonal and intrapersonal characteristics (Eyre, 2003). Even if for both groups socio-affective traits are defined and manifested by participants in different ways, they complement each other because for closeness to exist, a teacher must also be able to create an adequate classroom environment in which gifted students feel safe (Vogl & Preckel, 2014). Another relevant aspect mentioned by this group is the ability of teachers to be self-critical of their own practices, and learn from feedback, which is consistent with the findings of Vialle and Quigley (2002). The latter can be related to another aspect of the organization, in which activities such as classroom observations and feedback meetings are peer-collaboration elements that have a major role in the BETA Program.

Limitations

The study presents limitations such as a small sample size and a context in which these characteristics do not necessarily extrapolate to other gifted programs worldwide. Nevertheless, generalization is not the purpose of qualitative inquiry, “but to understand how people create meaning in their worlds and make sense of particular situations” (Remshardt & Flowers, 2007, p. 5). Another limitation is related to the approach we initially intended for data collection, which had an open-ended stance based on the collection and analysis of emergent data from participants. However, because of time constrictions we had to implement a more structured approach than the original design, which translated into more structured questions and narrowed analyses.

Implications for Practice

The richness and depth of the analyses made by community members offered a new perspective not only to be considered

at a discursive level but also for challenging current views and making adaptations to the program’s foundations, to achieve a more democratic and holistic approach (Freire, 1968) to teachers’ core competencies. Therefore, recruiting policies and professional development activities in the BETA program were revised and reformulated, taking into account these community perspectives. By incorporating participants’ views and perceptions of teacher competencies, a detailed profile could be outlined and, therefore, may help in the process of hiring instructors and analyzing the performance of those who are already part of the program.

Hereunder, we offer a tentative proposal to address the hiring process of future teachers of the gifted:

The results provided evidence about the complexities of selecting a teacher for the gifted, and shed light on how good this teacher must be, considering the intricate balance between CK, PCK, and socio-affective characteristics that are crucial in the teacher–student relationship. In this context, it can be easier to certify an instructor’s CK, but interpersonal and intrapersonal characteristics are much harder to evaluate; therefore, a selection process must be designed and conducted, which can include traditional and non-traditional practices such as the following:

- review of the CV;
- a personal statement that includes the prospective teacher’s motivation to teach gifted students;
- interview with a program instructor who teaches in the same (or similar) academic field to assess discipline-based competencies;
- assessment of cognitive flexibility and socio-emotional variables such as empathy, assertiveness, and motivation through the use of standardized tests;
- implementation of a 20-min activity with students so they can assess cognitive and non-cognitive characteristics; and
- personal interview with the program’s staff

If some of these practices are adopted, there can be more opportunities to find the best teachers and, therefore, to foster talent development in gifted students. These findings have implications not only for recruitment but also for teacher education programs that could contribute to preparing future teachers of the gifted with an array of skills combining cognitive and pedagogical aspects, socio-affective dispositions, and reflective practices. The comparison made by the students in the study—who had the opportunity to attend a program for the gifted—with their teachers in their regular schools clearly shows this concern.

For the teachers who are already teaching in the program, it is relevant to establish more opportunities to reflect about what it is expected from them as teachers of gifted students and to provide support in those areas in which they feel they need to improve. Therefore, the staff needs to design professional development activities for teachers who can effectively

address weaknesses and establish a community that fosters the areas of strength.

Implications for Research

Clearly, further investigations need to be conducted on this topic, especially to explore the phenomenon from the perspective of other Chilean programs that work with gifted students. Also, cross-cultural research would be convenient to analyze the profiles of teachers' competencies and characteristics from different cultural perspectives, to identify unique and distinctive teacher competencies from a culturally relevant angle.

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