

Gifted Child Quarterly

<http://gcq.sagepub.com/>

Student-Identified Exemplary Teachers: Insights From Talented Teachers

Marcia Gentry, Saiying Steenbergen-Hu and Byung-yeon Choi

Gifted Child Quarterly 2011 55: 111 originally published online 10 February 2011

DOI: 10.1177/0016986210397830

The online version of this article can be found at:

<http://gcq.sagepub.com/content/55/2/111>

Published by:



<http://www.sagepublications.com>

On behalf of:



National Association for Gifted Children

Additional services and information for *Gifted Child Quarterly* can be found at:

Email Alerts: <http://gcq.sagepub.com/cgi/alerts>

Subscriptions: <http://gcq.sagepub.com/subscriptions>


Reprints: <http://www.sagepub.com/journalsReprints.nav>

Permissions: <http://www.sagepub.com/journalsPermissions.nav>

Citations: <http://gcq.sagepub.com/content/55/2/111.refs.html>

Student-Identified Exemplary Teachers: Insights From Talented Teachers

Marcia Gentry¹, Saiying Steenbergen-Hu²,
and Byung-yeon Choi³

Gifted Child Quarterly
55(2) 111–125
© 2011 National Association for
Gifted Children
Reprints and permission:
sagepub.com/journalsPermissions.nav
DOI: 10.1177/0016986210397830
http://gcq.sagepub.com


Abstract

What roles do teachers play in the development of talent and in the attitude of students toward school? Research indicates that teacher enthusiasm, feedback, and content knowledge are keys to student motivation, learning, and engagement. Research also reveals the importance of positive and supportive student/teacher relationships. In previous work concerning student attitudes toward school, a handful of teachers emerged, in the eyes of their students, as exemplary. Follow-up study provided insights concerning the characteristics, practices, and qualities of these teachers. *What* and *how* they teach, and the ways they relate to individual students distinguish these exemplary and talented teachers. This research reveals quantitative and qualitative findings that help to explain the student-identified exemplary teachers ($n = 18$) from two samples that included more than 400 teachers. Implications for practice based on findings from these exemplary teachers are highlighted.

Keywords

exemplary teachers, student perceptions of teaching, effective teachers, learning environments, attitudes, teacher quality

Theoretical Rationale

During the past several decades, many studies have been conducted to investigate teaching effectiveness, and many characteristics of effective teachers have been identified. Effective teachers have a strong grasp of subject matter and high expectations of students and themselves (Demmon-Berger, 1986); the skills to balance students' intellectual achievements and interpersonal need in the classroom (Leithwood, 1990); and the ability to set high, realistic goals and present information in a manner that facilitates student learning (Good & Brophy, 1994). They care about and have positive interactions with their students (Cotton, 1995); possess professional, interpersonal, and intrapersonal knowledge (Collinson, 1996); develop strong student-teacher relationships (Wubbels, Levy, & Brekelmans, 1997); and seek new solutions through continued learning (Davis & Rimm, 2004). Primarily focused on teacher knowledge, pedagogical skills, and dispositions (Costa & Kallick, 2000), these characteristics and dispositions have been commonly recognized and have even been included in new national educational standards (e.g., National Board for Professional Teaching Standards, 1998; National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education, 2000).

Effective teachers, according to a survey conducted by Babbage (2002), were those who challenged students, adopted various teaching methods to actively involve students in class, were enthusiastic and encouraging, and who connected

learning at school with students' lives. Roberts (2006) described effective secondary teachers as those who support students' interests and who provide challenging opportunities that help students make their decisions about their career interests. She emphasized the need for teachers of secondary gifted students to regularly plan, preassess, and differentiate to ensure continuous, meaningful learning.

In their study of 101 K-12 public school teachers and 271 African American high school seniors, Thompson, Warren, Foy, and Dickerson (2008) found that the students valued teachers who provided clear explanations of course content; made coursework interesting, relevant, and challenging, and offered them extra help. Students also appreciated teachers who were patient, impartial, friendly, and humorous. Students not only value intelligence and subject matter expertise (Bishop, 1968; Mills, 2003), but they also attach great importance to personal traits such as enthusiasm for working with gifted students (Bishop, 1968), a sense of humor, confidence, respectfulness, and caring

¹Gifted Education Resource Institute, West Lafayette, IN, USA

²Duke University, Durham, NC, USA

³Jeonju National University of Education, Wansangu, Jeonju, Korea

Corresponding Author:

Marcia Gentry, Department of Educational Studies, Gifted Education Resource Institute, Beering Hall, Room 5116, 100 North University Street, West Lafayette, IN 47907-2098, USA
Email: mgentry@purdue.edu

(Robinson, 2008). Researchers have revealed that teacher enthusiasm (Babbage, 2002; Patrick, Turner, Meyer, & Midgley, 2003; Robinson, 2008), feedback (Patrick, Anderman, Ryan, Edelin, & Midgley, 2001), and content knowledge (e.g., Bishop, 1968; Tomlinson, Little, Tomlinson, & Bower, 2000; Robinson, 2008) are keys to student motivation, learning, and engagement. Researchers have also emphasized the importance of positive and supportive student/teacher relationships (Patrick et al., 2001; Robinson, 2008; Wentzel, 1997; Wubbels et al., 1997). Much attention has been paid to the “teacher effect” in research on methodology as well as to the effects of teachers in research on teaching because, quite simply, teachers affect learning. In fact, in gifted child education, studies have been conducted and articles written, concerning what makes a great teacher of the gifted (e.g., Bishop, 1968; Davis & Rimm, 2004; Feldhusen, 1997). In his influential work, Bishop found that teachers identified by gifted students as successful were described by these same students as motivating and inspiring and as having positive attitudes with student-centered teaching styles. The same is largely true today. Parents, administrators, and students often know a great teacher when they see one.

As the teachers’ professional development is essential to success in education (Robinson, Shore, & Enerson, 2007), much attention has been paid to “teacher effectiveness” in research on teaching. Doyle (1990) reported that most studies in the effectiveness tradition have used one of two categories of teaching variables: (a) teachers’ characteristics such as personality dimensions, beliefs, attitudes, intelligence, preparation, academic achievement or (b) teaching behaviors, measured by either high-inference scales (e.g., clarity, enthusiasm, warmth) or low-inference categories (e.g., frequency of praise, number of product questions per class session).

At the same time, influenced by the advances in cognitive psychology and constructivism, investigations on teaching have been focused on teachers’ cognition and knowledge construction. Several researchers acknowledge that the study of teachers’ beliefs is central to an understanding of the complexity of teachers’ knowledge, and the most valuable psychological construct to teacher effectiveness research (e.g., Artiles, 1996; Fenstermacher, 1979; Pajares, 1992; Pintrich, 1990). Brighton (2003) found teachers’ attitudes, experiences, and beliefs concerning teaching and learning affected their willingness to respond to professional development experiences. That is, research concerning teachers’ beliefs provides an appealing source for models of teacher effectiveness and will contribute to enhancing educational effectiveness and improving professional development.

Researchers have defined teachers’ beliefs in a variety of ways. For example, Kagan (1992) defined teacher belief as “a particularly provocative form of personal knowledge that is generally defined as pre- or in-service teachers’ implicit

assumptions about students, learning, classroom, and the subject matter to be taught” (pp. 65-67). Despite great variety in focus on research about teachers’ beliefs, Pajares (1992) contended that “few would argue that the beliefs teachers hold influence their perceptions and judgments, which, in turn, affect their behavior in the classroom” (p. 307). For example, Tobin and Fraser (1989) found that teacher beliefs had a major effect on the ways in which they implemented curriculum.

Kane, Sandretto, and Heath (2002), who study teachers’ beliefs, appear to have reached consensus on several issues. First, students enter teacher education programs with preexisting beliefs based on their experiences as students in schools, and these beliefs are robust and resist change. Second, the beliefs act as filters allowing in or filtering out new knowledge that is deemed compatible or incompatible with current beliefs. Third, beliefs exist in a tacit or implicit form and are difficult to articulate. Hativa, Barak, and Simhi (2001) contended that exemplary teachers differ from their colleagues, and particularly from novice teachers, in the complexity and sophistication of their thinking about teaching, in their cognitive schemata and pedagogical reasoning skills, in their decision making, and in their teaching-related knowledge.

Our own work, as well as that of others, has examined the role of student attitudes toward class activities on variables linked to learning and motivation. It follows, that if students have exceptionally positive attitudes toward certain teachers, that these teachers might be worthy of study. This study can provide insights into their practices, beliefs, and characteristics. At a time in which a federal push exists to standardize classrooms, curriculum, and teachers, examining exemplary teachers might provide a different direction concerning effective education and the development of quality educators. Furthermore, considering teachers whom students rate as superior can provide valuable insights into what works for students from their perspectives (Gentry & Owen, 2004).

Purpose

Many studies have been conducted concerning exemplary teachers, but few have student identification of these teachers as their basis. Thus, in this study, we seek to describe and explain teachers who have been designated as exemplary¹ on the basis of high student ratings concerning their classroom affect. In doing so, we provide information concerning attributes that distinguish this group of teachers, and we discuss findings and their implications for practice, thus adding to the knowledge base concerning top-quality, student-rated teachers.

Method and Procedures

Participants and Sampling Procedures

In two validity studies developing the instruments, My Class Activities (MCA, Gentry & Gable, 2001) and Student

Perceptions of Classroom Quality (SPOCQ, Gentry & Owen, 2004), we sampled classrooms from 49 individual schools from across the county. In each case, a purposive sample reflecting rural, urban, and suburban schools, and that contained a diverse population was sought using the National Research Center on the Gifted and Talented data base of collaborative schools. The MCA sample contained data from 23 schools and 163 teachers' students ($n = 3,744$) in 7 states. This sample contained 28% urban, 40% suburban, and 32% rural respondents whose ethnic backgrounds included White (76%), African American (10%), Asian (10%), Latino/a (3%), and Native American (<1%). The SPOCQ sample contained data from 241 teachers' students ($n = 7,411$) in 26 schools in 7 states. The ethnic backgrounds of these students included White (67%), African American (12%), Latino/a (13%), Asian (5%), Native American (3%), and Other (6%), and they attended schools in urban (55%), suburban (13%), and rural (32%) settings. Both of these samples approximate the 2000 United States census data on race (U.S. Census Bureau, 2004). For both samples, all students present on the day that the instrument was administered completed the surveys, and students completed surveys for all teachers present on that day. Thus, data were collected from many students about a range of teachers in each building, preventing collection of data from only superior teachers or from their best students.

From these two samples of teachers and their students, we selected the highest scoring teachers based on student ratings on constructs of appeal, challenge, choice, enjoyment, interest, meaningfulness, and self-efficacy on both the MCA and the SPOCQ. MCA assesses third- through eighth-grade student perceptions of challenge (involves rigor, depth, and complexity), choice (empowers students to direct and make important decisions about their learning), enjoyment (provides students with learning pleasure and satisfaction), and interest (reflects students' preferences for topics, subjects, and activities). SPOCQ assesses perceptions of 7th- through 12th-grade students on challenge and choice and on the additional constructs of appeal (combines elements of interest and enjoyment to create a satisfying and pleasant learning environment in which students are positively engaged in topics that reflect their preferences), meaningfulness (content and methods relevant to students' lives, significant and worth caring about), and self-efficacy (reflects students' perceived confidence in performing important classroom learning behaviors). Students respond to statements on each instrument using a 5-point response scale, with a high score indicating *more agreement with* (SPOCQ) or a *higher frequency of* (MCA) each statement. Teachers with high scores on these constructs would have classrooms that reflect a high degree of these constructs in their classrooms as perceived by many of their students. These constructs have been shown to be central to learning and motivation.

To determine the highest scoring teachers, we aggregated scores on all the constructs and rank-ordered the teachers

from highest to lowest. We were interested in teachers who scored in the top 5% to 10% of the sample (the top 20 to 40 teachers as scored by their students). We elected to use a criterion for inclusion of 0.75 standard deviations above the aggregated scores of the rest of the sample, because a difference of 0.75 standard deviations can be considered a medium to large effect size (Cohen, 1988). This method yielded 8 elementary teachers and 22 secondary teachers from the total of 404 teachers. From these 30 teachers, we eliminated 3 individuals because their scores resulted from fewer than 10 student responses. Since the original data were collected in the late 1990s and early 2000s, we then attempted to locate the remaining 27 teachers. These teachers existed in 15 of the 49 schools from the original two samples. We were unable to locate 9 of these teachers. Of the 18 individuals whom we located, all consented to participate. The participants came from 9 different schools from 8 districts and 4 states. Table 1 depicts a detailed demographic summary of the participants.

The high-scoring teachers whom we failed to locate came from six districts in six states and taught in a total of seven different schools. Three of these districts are not represented by the sample of teachers whom we did locate. Of these missing teachers, one each taught fourth grade, science, art, foreign language, language arts, on-the-job-training, and mathematics, and two others taught social studies.

Design

We used a mixed-method design, relying on quantitative scores of students' ratings of the teachers to select and describe exemplary individual teachers. Then, because these teachers were identified and selected on the basis of these quantitative data, we used qualitative methods to learn from the teachers themselves, how they perceived this designation, and how they saw themselves as teachers. We followed the quantitative data with survey questions, interviews, and observations of these teachers to provide a richer understanding of these exemplary, gifted teachers.

Data Sources

We used existing data from instrument design work and then gathered qualitative data through written survey, phone interview, and observations.

MCA and SPOCQ assess student perceptions of class quality on constructs of appeal, challenge, choice, interest, enjoyment, meaningfulness, and self-efficacy as described above. Both instruments have undergone several psychometric validation studies in which model fit was examined (i.e., MCA comparative fit index [CFI] = .95, root mean square error of approximation [RMSEA] = .04; SPOCQ CFI = .997, RMSEA = .051) and in which internal consistency estimates were examined and also found to be in acceptable ranges for affective instruments (e.g., MCA data reliability estimates

Table 1. Demographic Information of Participants

Pseudonym	Gender	Ethnicity	Highest degree	Years in education	Type of school	Subject/grade taught (current position)
Mr. Lee	M	Caucasian	MA +	13 Years HS (2 years as principal)	Rural HS #1	Social sciences (principal)
Mr. E	M	Caucasian	BS	32 years, HS	Rural HS #2	Art (retired)
Ms. SG	F	Caucasian	BS	6 years HS	Rural HS #2	Agriculture education
Mr. Bret	M	Caucasian	BS	20 years, MS/HS	Urban HS #3	G/T Humanities
Ms. SP	F	Caucasian	MA in process	13 years	Urban HS #3	G/T Humanities
Ms. B	F	Caucasian	MA	20 years	Urban HS #3	G/T LA (gifted and talented coordinator)
CC	F	Caucasian	MA +	20 years, ES	Rural ES #4	Third grade (kindergarten)
Anastasia	F	Amerasian	MA +	18 years, ES	Urban ES #5	Fourth grade
Mr. Jeff	M	Caucasian	BA +18	24 years, MS/HS	Rural MS #6	Seventh grade SS (HS advanced placement)
Ms. O	F	Caucasian	EdS	30 yrs. ES/HS	Urban ES G/T magnet #7	Fifth grade, G/T (HS reading specialist)
Ms. Abby	F	African American	BA	30 years, ES	Suburban ES #8	Fourth grade
Mr. Earl	M	Caucasian	MA +	20 years, HS	Rural CTE Center #9	NRAT
Mr. Leo	M	Caucasian	BS +	34 years HS	Rural CTE Center #9	Diesel mechanics
Mr. L	M	Caucasian	BA	6 years HS	Rural CTE Center #9	Welding
Mr. Fredrick	M	Caucasian	MA	9 years HS	Rural CTE Center #9	Criminal justice
AJ	M	Caucasian	EdS	34 years HS	Rural CTE Center #9	NRAT (retired)
Mr. Tom	M	Caucasian	MA	19 years HS	Rural CTE Center #9	Building trades
Mr. Bear	M	Caucasian	MA	30 years HS	Rural CTE Center #9	Early education (retired)

Note: HS = high school; ES = elementary school; CTE = career and technical education; MS = middle school; G/T = gifted and talented; LA = language; NRAT = natural resources and agri-science technologies.

ranged from .75 to .92; SPOCQ data reliability estimates ranged from .81 to .85; see Gentry & Gable, 2001; Gentry & Owen, 2004; Gentry & Springer, 2002; Pereira, Peters, & Gentry, in press for more information).

Participants responded to the written survey, which contained nine questions (see Appendix A), and on it they selected their preferred pseudonym. Participants answered questions from a semistructured interview protocol in an audiotaped phone interview format (see Appendix B). We made site visitations to three different schools observing nine teachers and obtained videotaped teaching sessions from three additional participants. All interviews were transcribed, and field notes from observations were entered into an observation log.

Data Analysis

We summarized demographic data and compared them with the samples from which the participants were drawn as well as to the national descriptive data for U.S. teachers. Student ratings of these exemplary teachers were calculated and compared with mean scores of the teachers from the instrumentation samples. Qualitative data were aggregated and analyzed to provide insights concerning these teachers using techniques suggested by Strauss and Corbin (1990) in which

open, axial, and finally selective codes or themes were identified. After themes were developed, qualitative data were reanalyzed to provide content analysis counts of the frequency of responses from teachers on written and oral survey questions. Qualitative analysis involved three team members who viewed the raw data separately and who developed initial codes. Team members then discussed their individual findings developing axial and finally selective codes used in reporting the findings. Final themes are described in the qualitative narrative.

Results

Descriptive Results: Demographics

We collected demographic information concerning the gender, ethnicity, education, experience, and teaching assignments of the exemplary teachers in this sample. Compared with other teachers across the country, these teachers differed in several ways as described below. These demographic data are summarized and depicted in Table 1.

Gender. Male teachers comprised 61% of the sample, much higher than the national male representation of 24.8% (National Center for Education Statistics, 2006). This can be explained in part by the disproportionate number of

secondary educators ($n = 13$) and the fact that seven of these teachers came from one Career and Technical Education (CTE) Center, an area that still tends to employ more male than female teachers.

Ethnicity and community type. With the exception of one African American and another self-identified Amerasian,² the teachers in this sample were White. Twelve of the 18 teachers taught in a rural environment (seven from one CTE center), five taught in an urban environment (three from one high school), and one in a suburban environment, and they represented nine different schools in eight different communities. This sample shows an overrepresentation of rural teachers of 67%, compared with the national proportion of rural teacher of 17.9% (National Center for Education Statistics, 2006). As with the overrepresentation of male teachers, the overrepresentation of rural teachers can be partially explained by the seven teachers from the rural CTE center, which was an anomaly with its high number of exemplary teachers when compared with the rest of the sample schools. Without these teachers, the rural representation would have approximated that of the sample.

Education and background. Also noteworthy is the fact that 55.6% ($n = 10$) of these teachers held advanced degrees, whereas, nationally only 46.5% of teachers have earned degrees beyond a bachelor's degree (National Center for Education Statistics, 2006). Further examination of these teachers' credentials revealed a wide variety of extra study, certificates, and other areas of expertise. Noteworthy was the fact that 12 (67%) of these teachers had engaged in either coursework or workshops in gifted education, compared with only 25% of the teachers from the two samples. All these teachers had completed coursework and study beyond the minimum degree requirements for teaching, and many held additional certifications or had served in capacities beyond teaching, including coaching, Youth Club Coordinator, Athletic Director, Principal, Reading Specialist, and Program Coordinator. For example, Ms. O in addition to her EdS in educational administration, held two BS degrees (one elementary and another secondary), a master's degree in curriculum and instruction and had completed an additional 45 hours of graduate credit with a license in reading. CC held a BS in elementary education, an MS in educational leadership, and had earned additional credits in gifted education, and in the fall of 2005 she was taking graduate courses in kindergarten literacy. Anastasia completed 45 credits beyond her masters' degree. This pattern of continuing education was typical of the teachers in this sample. The CTE teachers all had professional experience in their area of teaching, with Mr. Fredrick serving as a police officer for 23 years (and still working part time as a deputy), Mr. L developing his own tool and die business, Mr. Earl working as a farmer and EMT (emergency medical technician), Mr. Tom working in building trades, Mr. Leo working as a diesel mechanic, AJ working as a farmer, and Mr. Bear working in early childhood.

Awards/honors. Overall, 78% percent of these teachers had won or been nominated for a variety of teaching awards. One teacher indicated that she had not received any awards and three other teachers did not return the written survey on which this question existed. It is possible that these three teachers might have won awards of which we are unaware. Most of the teachers were nominated for multiple honors. For example, Mr. Bear was nominated both as *Teacher of the Year* for his school in 2000 and *Teacher of the Year* for his county in 2002. Mr. Tom was named as Michigan Construction Teachers Association Star Performer in 1997-1998, and his school Vocational Teacher of the Year in 2001. Mr. Lee was named Teacher of the Year by the senior class on two occasions. Anastasia was nominated for Disney's Teacher of the Year, Nine Who Care for local news station, and selected for Who's Who in Education (chosen by former students). Mr. Jeff was voted Teacher of the Year in a Texas school district, Teacher of the Month in two Michigan districts, and as a Coca Cola Regional Outstanding Teacher. Ms. O was nominated for Who's Who of America's Teachers in 2005, Who's Who of American Women in 2004, received a Retired Teacher's Scholarship in 2000, a Target Scholarship in 2001, and the Wall of Tolerance recognition in 2003, among other honors. These awards and honors provide additional evidence concerning the quality of these teachers and are congruent with their students' high ratings.

Experience. Three of the exemplary teachers had retired (Mr. E, AJ, Mr. Bear), and four others had changed positions. Mr. Lee is currently a building principal, but enjoys teaching so much that he still teaches a high school class every morning, and Ms. O who had taught fifth-grade students in a gifted magnet school currently works as a high school reading specialist for the same district. Ms. B changed districts and now coordinates gifted and talented programs for a district. Mr. Jeff moved from teaching middle school social studies to teaching primarily high school history, social studies, and Advanced Placement (AP) courses. Although some of the exemplary teachers changed jobs on numerous occasions during their career, others stayed in the same place, even teaching the same grade and/or subject for many years. The number of years working in education ranged from 6 to 34 years, an average of 20.6 years. In general, these exemplary teachers were experienced teachers who enjoyed teaching.

Teaching areas. We found that the majority of the exemplary teachers in our sample taught in nontraditional settings, such as career education ($n = 8$), gifted schools or classes ($n = 4$), and art ($n = 1$); and the remainder of the participants taught elementary classrooms ($n = 3$) or social studies at the secondary level ($n = 2$), whereas, the majority of the teachers (>90%) from the instrumentation samples taught in general classrooms, and they taught general subjects such as English, social studies, math, or science.

Table 2. Participants' Mean Scores on the Variables Assessed by Student Perceptions of Classroom Quality (Secondary)

Participant	Appeal	Challenge	Choice	Meaning	Self-efficacy	Aggregate
Mr. Lee (<i>n</i> = 35)	3.75 (.59)	4.00 (.65)	4.09 (.53)	4.43 (.43)	4.11 (.46)	4.08 (.48)
Mr. E (<i>n</i> = 17)	4.08 (.51)	4.38 (.54)	4.53 (.36)	4.07 (.70)	4.19 (.50)	4.25 (.47)
Ms. SG (<i>n</i> = 10)	3.79 (.62)	3.72 (.56)	4.08 (.46)	3.94 (.50)	3.99 (.57)	3.90 (.48)
Mr. Bret (<i>n</i> = 18)	3.98 (.59)	4.16 (.55)	3.96 (.46)	4.06 (.53)	3.82 (.81)	4.00 (.54)
Ms. SP (<i>n</i> = 18)	3.98 (.59)	4.16 (.55)	3.96 (.46)	4.06 (.53)	3.82 (.81)	4.00 (.54)
Ms. B (<i>n</i> = 16)	3.72 (.82)	4.01 (.64)	4.24 (.53)	4.06 (.63)	3.93 (.90)	4.00 (.66)
Mr. Earl (<i>n</i> = 58)	3.67 (.49)	3.92 (.34)	4.22 (.38)	3.95 (.34)	3.85 (.49)	3.92 (.34)
Mr. Leo (<i>n</i> = 19)	3.66 (.68)	4.02 (.49)	3.86 (.48)	3.87 (.45)	3.77 (.50)	3.84 (.46)
Mr. L (<i>n</i> = 23)	3.68 (.54)	4.00 (.65)	3.97 (.53)	3.90 (.50)	3.93 (.62)	3.90 (.51)
Mr. Fredrick (<i>n</i> = 43)	4.22 (.43)	4.12 (.48)	4.25 (.41)	4.28 (.35)	4.30 (.41)	4.25 (.33)
AJ (<i>n</i> = 22)	3.81 (.48)	3.90 (.52)	4.14 (.33)	3.95 (.36)	3.82 (.44)	3.92 (.37)
Mr. Tom (<i>n</i> = 29)	3.91 (.49)	4.10 (.45)	3.84 (.54)	3.91 (.43)	3.86 (.50)	3.92 (.40)
Mr. Bear (<i>n</i> = 63)	3.81 (.54)	3.84 (.51)	4.10 (.41)	3.98 (.39)	3.95 (.45)	3.94 (.39)
Total sample (<i>N</i> = 7,254)	3.06 (.83)	3.41 (.72)	3.43 (.69)	3.43 (.71)	3.44 (.70)	3.35 (.62)

Table 3. Participants' Mean Scores on the Variables Assessed by My Class Activities (Elementary)

Participant	Challenge	Choice	Enjoyment	Interest	Aggregated
CC (<i>n</i> = 20)	3.63 (.58)	3.29 (.50)	4.41 (.69)	4.20 (.51)	3.88 (.47)
Anastasia (<i>n</i> = 18)	3.85 (.39)	3.53 (.67)	4.45 (.38)	3.82 (.62)	3.91 (.42)
Mr. Jeff (<i>n</i> = 20)	3.64 (.46)	3.59 (.52)	4.39 (.48)	4.02 (.31)	3.91 (.34)
Ms. O (<i>n</i> = 22)	4.06 (.33)	3.84 (.44)	4.27 (.46)	3.99 (.45)	4.05 (.37)
Ms. Abby (<i>n</i> = 22)	3.69 (.47)	3.55 (.53)	4.34 (.56)	3.89 (.46)	3.87 (.37)
Total sample (<i>N</i> = 3,806)	3.53 (.58)	3.05 (.68)	3.64 (.89)	3.45 (.68)	3.42 (.56)

Quantitative Findings

As described earlier, participants included in this study received high ratings from their students on constructs of Appeal, Challenge, Choice, Enjoyment, Interest, Meaningfulness, and Self-efficacy. These aggregated ratings ranged from 0.75 to 1.45 standard deviations above the means of the two samples from which these teachers were selected. Students rated these teachers, on average, 1.04 (secondary) and .090 (elementary) standard deviations higher than other teachers in the samples. Table 2 contains the mean student ratings for individual constructs and an aggregate score of all the constructs for the secondary teachers in this sample. Table 3 contains the same scores for the elementary teachers in this sample. Each table also contains the average scores for the entire sample from which these teachers were drawn. Clearly, these quantitative data provide evidence of how these teachers differed from others in the instrumentation samples based on the perceptions of their students concerning constructs related to learning and motivation. The quantitative differences formed the basis for the further qualitative inquiry, each data source providing important triangulation for the other.

Qualitative Thematic Findings

Data analysis yielded four themes that described these teachers and helped to explain the quantitative findings that distinguished them from others in the national samples:

- Theme 1: These teachers know and take a personal interest in their students.
- Theme 2: These teachers set high expectations for themselves and for their students.
- Theme 3: These teachers make content and learning meaningful and relevant to the future and respect students' choices.
- Theme 4: These teachers have a clear passion for their students, teaching, and for their content.

After developing the final themes, we reviewed the transcripts and surveys and performed a content analysis by coding each interview and survey by theme as they appeared. This resulted in a frequency count for each theme and each participant; thus providing a picture of the prevalence of each theme in the data. The results of this content analysis are contained in Table 4. Clearly, all four themes were

Table 4. Frequency of Participant Responses by Theme

Pseudonym	Theme 1	Theme 2	Theme 3	Theme 4
Mr. L	6	15	8	7
Mr. E	7	10	4	3
AJ	8	9	6	7
Mr. Jeff	7	9	6	11
Ms. B	6	7	6	4
Anastasia	7	14	6	9
Mr. Earl	13	10	8	7
Mr. Bret	2	11	3	7
Mr. Lee	4	5	7	6
Ms. Abby	9	6	1	13
Mr. Tom	5	13	14	5
Ms. SP	2	8	1	1
Ms. SG	8	1	7	4
Ms. O	4	2	1	4
CC	7	9	6	5
Mr. Leo	5	9	6	3
Mr. Fredrick	7	6	5	6
Mr. Bear	2	4	2	1
Total	105	148	97	103

represented by the 18 participants, with Theme 2 (teachers setting high expectations for themselves and their students) most frequently mentioned by the teachers. Themes 1, 3, and 4 received about one third fewer comments, with about 100 comments each.

Theme 1: These teachers know and take a personal interest in their students. The concept of teachers knowing and taking a personal interest in their students was evidenced in many ways, including the teachers' involvement with students that extended beyond the school day. Sixteen of the teachers spoke of working with students outside the school day. This work included things such as coaching and involvement in youth organizations as well as less formal venues such as watching them play sports or camping with them. As Mr. Earl explained, "Students are looking at us working, and we need to let them see us as real people. I enjoy spending time hiking, fishing, hunting, and camping with my students." Ms. Abby described meaningfulness as, "I have two kids who play on the same basketball team, and I saw them play in their league. When they show up to an event out of school and I'm there, that's meaningfulness!" Mr. Earl even described bailing one of his students out of jail. He explained that the student needed to understand that just because he made a mistake, it did not mean that his teacher had lost faith in him.

Having personal knowledge of their students was important to these teachers, as Mr. L explained, "I know them. I can tell you probably any student . . . what their hobbies are, what they do, what they're involved in . . . I genuinely know my students." Ms. SG explained, "You know what activities they're in and talk to them about getting involved in activities and are personal with them. The kids like that,

they say, 'Oh, she really cares about me.'" Mr. Lee described how he approaches his class:

I go into the classroom and really care about kids. I am interested in them, not just about them learning the subject matter, but actually having a connection with them, the people who they are, and I have an interest in their lives in and outside of school.

Furthermore, Mr. Lee explained his perception of what students find important in their teachers:

When I ask students what their best experience is in a class, they indicate a teacher who is engaged, and who has taken the time to connect to them as people, and sometimes I think that is what comes first.

Mr. Jeff described how students trusted him, "I've had kids come up and say, 'Hey, Mr. Jeff, can I talk to you?' It turns out that I'm a person they trust enough to share a problem." Ms. O shared a similar thought when she explained,

I believe very strongly that you need to build relationships with the students first before you're going to get high academic achievement. I think that classrooms where students are successful are the ones in which positive relationships are built from the start.

These exemplary teachers each showed acute awareness of the importance of knowing and connecting with their students. They genuinely liked and cared about their students.

These teachers viewed their students as individuals first and students second and thus did not give up on their students, but tried new approaches. Ms. B explained, "Each child that you have [as a teacher] is somebody special." CC offered the following suggestion for teachers:

Adore them, find every single strength possible . . . you have to find something they do well, and you have to absolutely strive to make that count for every minute that they're there. Make them special.

Several teachers acknowledged that it was the individual students who helped to motivate them as teachers on a regular basis. Others acknowledged that they have had some very challenging students, but as Abby put it, "I've never given up on any child, ever." In general, they seemed to enjoy the challenge of trying to reach, connect to, and thus, effectively educate their students. Whether it was Mr. Earl going to the jail or hospital to help one of his students or Mr. Jeff serving as a sounding board for his students, these teachers connected to their individual students.

Theme 2: These teachers set high expectations for themselves and for their students. These teachers recognized the importance of challenging their students to learn. As Mr. Lee explained,

There is a misconception that students like easy teachers and classes. This is false. I have found that students like to be liked, and respond to challenges when they first know that their teacher respects them and likes them.

All these teachers described having high standards for their students and for themselves. Specifically, five teachers described themselves as “no-nonsense, demanding, difficult, or strict.” The kids like and trust them, but these teachers are not easy; they push their students and expect them to achieve. Anastasia explained, “If you expect kids to exceed [sic], they will.” As Mr. Bret described,

I’m very demanding, extremely demanding. I’m very blunt. I’m very honest. I don’t settle for inadequacy. Basic writing in Texas is learning how to pass the TAKS test. It’s minimal, so when they start writing that way, I just put a big F on it. I tell them that they can pass TAKS and that’s good, but we have to take it to a much higher level.

Similarly, Ms. B explained, “I don’t care if it was the best essay I had ever read, it would be covered in red pen, so that they would know that there is always something to go back and make better.” Mr. Leo recalled, “Not afraid of hard work. Definitely willing to do more than what is expected or spend more time making sure that we’re up-to-date, current with the new technologies that are around.” Ms. B also explained how she applied her high standards to herself:

I am constantly looking to be better. I am never stagnant. Something better that will work, something else that will get to the kids. Something that will improve. I want to make sure that I know what I’m doing and what’s better and how it is better.

The exemplary teachers indicated a thirst for quality in their own teaching. CC said that she was competitive with herself in seeking ways to do more for children at her school. Mr. Lee described his philosophy:

I believe that teachers should teach their class like it is the most important class students will ever take. I take my responsibilities to motivate students and to show enthusiasm for the subject matter very seriously.

Involvement in competitions helped to elevate the level of expectation for several of the teachers. For example,

Mr. E explained how he focused on the positive aspects of his students’ work, but that they also entered art competitions on a regular basis. His students were very competitive in these competitions:

I knew my kids were learning because of the results. We’ve entered a lot of competitions, and I’m not bragging, but we just kind of blew away the competition. At one competition we always won first place. And one year we got the top seven places in the state.

Mr. Jeff took a similar approach to his AP classes and Mr. Earl with his Future Farmers of America (FFA) competitions. They held high expectations and helped their students achieve at high levels.

These teachers did not just have high expectations; they also helped students achieve what they expected of them. For example, these teachers discussed working with individual students to help them succeed. Mr. Fredrick explained,

I sit with each student individually and I will say,

What is it you want? I will show you how to do these things, even how to do the work in the classroom. Here’s an example, let me show you how to do this, let me help you though this, let me show you some more examples so you will know what decisions to make and where to look.

It makes them open their eyes a little bit and get out of their comfort zone.

Mr. Tom, from Building Trades, explained that students like being held to high standards:

I think they really appreciate that I don’t let them cut corners. If they haven’t done something right, they need to redo it, and I don’t think that any of them think I want to give them false kudos or anything like that. They know that I set high expectations and that I often times set higher expectations for them than they have for themselves.

Ms. SP had expectations, provided help, and finally connected with a specific student as she helped him learn to take pride in his work and succeed in school. She discussed an intervention with this student:

I pushed him intellectually, then he would have the opportunity to get up and leave if his anger got too much for him or he ever felt too frustrated. He was an extremely difficult child at the beginning of the year, but toward the end of the year he was absolutely wonderful for me.

Theme 3: These teachers make content and learning meaningful and relevant to the future and respect students' choices. They used real problems, related learning to the real world and to their students' futures. Mr. Lee described helping students learn to pay attention to the world around them as he integrated society and culture with philosophy and lessons in the classroom, providing real-life examples to help articulate meaning in their course of study. He involved students in news of the day, debate, doing research, looking up primary and secondary sources, employing critical thinking and presentation skills as a way to connect them to meaningful learning. Mr. L discussed how a "C" in welding wasn't good enough, and he helped his students understand the context of the profession and how there really was no room for sloppy welds.

These teachers indicated that they tried to integrate meaningful examples from life and to help students consider and plan their futures. For example, Mr. Fredrick brought in *Crime Scene Investigation* episodes, court cases from the local news, stories from his law enforcement career, and carefully attended to students' questions. He involved them in self-defense workshops, tazer gun training, and he helped them understand the nuances of law enforcement from the perspective of one who is still involved in the profession. The students chose areas of interest for further exploration, with students pursuing interests from corrections officer to police officer to attorney. Mr. Tom's students build a home each year, so they have on-site, relevant content, hands on learning, and the opportunity to learn and solve real problems. He explained,

Most of my students don't like the challenges of the traditional classroom. In my program they can come outside and work very hard physically, building a house, they feel construction is something they can enjoy and take pride in.

These teachers offered student-centered, meaningful choices to their students, including choices in areas of focused or advanced study and for placements in the field of study. They provided individualization, including options for independent study, self-pacing, mentorships, apprenticeships, compacting, and acceleration. For example, Mr. E learned that one of his students was very slow and meticulous about that everything she did, so he just let her take her time, and she spent 9 weeks on a project that won a competition at the national level. As Mr. Earl stated, "Students were treated as individuals with different expectations based on their abilities and talents." Mr. Bear described how students in his program were in control of their learning, with self-paced class work as the standard.

Students were given choices everyday in their planning of their work. They chose the order of the curriculum

they wished to study, methods of preparing their work, and the amount of time they needed to complete the projects. They chose when they were ready for the unit tests.

In addition, many teachers discussed using hands-on, active learning and offering students a voice with input and choices. Ms. B took a student-centered approach:

I never taught them. They would get in groups, break it apart, and they would come to me, and I would ask questions back and forth. I would challenge every single thought that they had and make them prove it.

Mr. Earl had students choose areas of study, and he eliminated his "no hats in class" policy after speaking with a student who at 17 was balding and in tears at the request to remove his hat. As he explained,

I ask him why he was so angry and challenging me in front of class. It was at this point that he told me that he wore the hat because he was going bald. WOW, what a setback . . . I thought for a simple stunning moment and said, "Evan, a lot of my friends are bald." His reply was the first change in my career about rules . . . He said, "Your friends aren't 17 years old." I no longer have that rule in my classroom.

To help their students learn content, these teachers developed a welcoming classroom climate, used humor, and had fun with their students. In all, one third of the teachers in this sample mentioned their use of positive humor as a way to connect to and motivate their students. Mr. Leo said, "I am honest, make the class fun, tell related stories. I think they can tell I care. I try to make them think, not just give them the answer." Mr. Jeff explained the importance of his passion for his subject area (history) in hooking kids into learning:

I love to take a kid who doesn't like history, that's my passion, I try and convert them. I believe in positive feedback, if they give an answer, I'll say, "Hey, this is a pretty tough question, lets see if anyone can do it." And if they do, I'll go crazy—no literally, I do. The kids laugh at it, and part of that has to do with the fact that I'm the football coach *and* I co-direct the musical here every year. So, I know a lot of show tunes that apply to things we're studying. And I have 3 sons, two teenagers, so I'm up on the lyrics. So I break into song. They appreciate it, and I think humor keeps interest, too. They think I'm crazy.

Anastasia explained that she never overdressed because she wanted to be able to be on the floor with them, to dance and play music and be on their level as they experienced

learning. "I try to teach each subject through student participation, examples from life, and a sense of humor."

These teachers were not afraid to challenge their students' thinking. Mr. Bret explained,

I tell a lot of my Black students, just because your Black doesn't mean you have to vote Democrat. But it doesn't mean that you have to vote Republican just to be opposite. I tell girls that just because you're a girl doesn't mean can't go into math, science, and engineering in school. Try to get away from all that and try to bring some meaning in your life and try and recognize when people try and pull one over on you in politics or society as a whole and become a better person and take it with you so that one day you become more informed.

In summary, these exemplary teachers acted as developers of talent using skilled and expert instruction in which they focused on individual strengths and interests while encouraging students to reach their potentials and assisting them with future plans.

Theme 4: These teachers have a clear passion for their students, teaching, and for their content. As evident throughout this narrative, these teachers connected to their students; however, they also indicated a passion for their content areas. Three of the teachers approaching or qualifying for retirement explained that they still loved what they were doing, and as a result of this enjoyment, they simply were not ready to give it up. Mr. E admitted to hating snow days. Ms. B and Mr. Bret described their passion for English and history, respectively, as a major reason for entering teaching. They wanted to share their excitement for their subjects with kids. Mr. Fredrick, after 20 years as a police officer, explained that the only thing better than that job was sharing it with young people:

I have a true passion for the occupational field that I teach. I still get excited on Friday afternoons about going to my other job for the night. When I teach my students, I teach to them from experience and with true feeling. The only better job is teaching the occupation itself.

Mr. Earl repeatedly described his passion for the Earth, her resources, and the responsibility of stewardship:

I am proud to teach the disciplines of Agriscience and Natural Resources. I also feel and sense of urgency to teach the importance of stewardship of the land. I enjoy seeing students learn how to hear the earth. I like to see kids smile. When teaching soils, I ask them to take their shoes off and allow the earth to touch their skin. How do they know what the Earth feels like, it is

something very nice, very beautiful, and you're connected to it from the ground up. I truly, in my heart of hearts, want students to realize that they are the future stewards of the Earth and of our culture and of who they are.

A total of 67% of these teachers indicated that they had good relationships with their administrators, with seven of the nine administrators agreeing that the teachers the students identified were exemplary. Two administrators expressed concern or surprise about three of the student-identified teachers being selected for this study. One teacher admitted that it had been challenging or difficult to work with administration. Two others were ambivalent and the remainder expressed that their lack of organization or their non-conventional ways might be a source of frustration to their administrators. At the same time, these teachers indicated that their students were their primary concern. They suggested that they had an "open-door policy" with students, colleagues, and administrators. Several teachers ($n = 5$) expressed dismay at being selected for this study. They were humble, and some suggested the results must have been a fluke. Many gave credit to their colleagues and peers and marveled at how they managed to emerge as exemplary. Three of the teachers were uncomfortable throughout the interview with the designation. However, despite the overall modest tone of these teachers, their words and stories indicated a quiet confidence in their teaching abilities.

These teachers believe they made a difference in their students' lives. For example, Mr. Lee described how his view of teaching changed on having a student discuss her thoughts of suicide with him:

. . . but to think that I was the person they were going to come and talk to about that really showed me that my influence was way beyond whether or not these kids understood the difference between a Republican or Democrat . . . On some levels, we were connected, teacher and learner, and I just realized that this business was really high stakes. It's not just about kids walking through buildings and classrooms, and teaching them about content. Teaching them about life, and modeling good behavior and sensitivity. At that point, I felt that I learned the true role of a teacher.

It was this belief of making a difference that served as a fundamental driving force for their passion concerning their students and teaching.

These teachers described their greatest accomplishments in terms of the students whose lives they touched. Some described individual students, others described reaching the difficult student, and others described students, in general. They all discussed their mission to affect their students, and each indicated that they believed that their work was

important and that they made a difference in the lives of their students. Seventy-two percent of these teachers ($n = 13$), like CC or Mr. Fredrick, described their work as a calling, “I truly believe that I was put on Earth to do what I am doing. Therefore, I better do my best at it” (CC). They respected their students, though several indicated that respect has to be earned whether one is a teacher or a student. “Teachers say that kids should give them respect, but we shouldn’t give anyone respect, it should be earned” (Abby).

When discussing their greatest achievements as teachers, these individuals spoke of individual students. For example, Ms. O described a thank you gift given to her by a student “who started his own business in his 20s. He credited me for where he was today because I helped him to read.” CC said that her greatest achievement was that “students progressed educationally, emotionally, and socially under my care.” Mr. Bear smiled when he said that his greatest satisfaction came from having former students working as teachers in schools where they had been placed for work experience when in his program. He also said that retirement is great, but that he misses his kids and the CTE center with all the great people. AJ said that the things he was most proud of were “parents asking for their student to be in my class, and parents asking me not to retire until their student had been in my class.”

Ten of the teachers spoke of students returning to see them, visiting them or remaining in contact with them. For example, Mr. Fredrick explained that his greatest joy was seeing one of his first students become a police officer and then having that student return for a visit. Mr. Bret said his greatest achievement as a teacher was “hearing from past students who thank me for helping them prepare for college and life in general.” Mr. Bear, the CTE teacher who prepared future teachers said that he enjoyed being in touch with and able to identify 15 former students who were currently working as educators in the community. Abby, who taught elementary school explained how meaningful it is to her when her former students come back to visit, “I am so humbled when they ask me to attend their graduation.” In fact, 56% of these teachers mentioned that former students visited them or remained in contact with them. Mr. Earl captured the reason so many of these teachers’ students do choose to return as he explained,

That it is on a senior’s last day that I take them one at a time to the door and tell them that they are no longer welcome to pass through this door as a student, BUT PLEASE KNOW, that they are always welcome to return as a friend. My door is open! The adventure of life is just beginning and I wish their spirits well . . .

Discussion and Implications

Overall, the findings from this study confirm and extend previous research concerning teacher effectiveness and offer

insights into student-identified exemplary teachers. The themes helped to explain why these teachers emerged as exemplary, identified by their students’ perceptions, from more than 400 teachers in two instrumentation samples. These exemplary teachers found ways to connect to their students and became involved in more than simply teaching. They engaged in activities, such as coaching, academic competitions, attending student events, directing the musical, advising student council, competing in art fairs, and supporting their students’ extracurricular endeavors. They talked about creating classroom communities in which individuals experienced both safety and sense of belonging. They had rapport, respect, and trust with their students. They challenged their students to achieve and continually sought ways to support their students in their efforts to achieve, often pushing them to work harder, think harder, take risks, and plan for their futures. Quite simply, they liked their students and in return, their students responded positively to them.

Consistent with some previous findings, synthesis of the four themes reveals these exemplary teachers as having passion for content, students, and teaching (Bishop, 1968; Robinson, 2008); high expectations of self and students (Demmon-Berger, 1986; Robinson et al., 2007); sense of humor (Robinson, 2008; Thompson et al., 2008); depth of knowledge about and connections with students (Cotton, 1995; Robinson, 2008; Wubbels et al., 1997); ability to engage students in meaningful learning (Babbage, 2002; Good & Brophy, 1994; Thompson et al., 2008) and future planning (Roberts, 2006); and willingness to offer individual students challenges and choices (Roberts, 2006).

These teachers illustrated that certain professional behaviors or personal characteristics, such as teacher enthusiasm (Babbage, 2002; Patrick et al., 2003), content knowledge (Bishop, 1968; Robinson, 2008; Tomlinson et al., 2000), positive and supportive student/teacher relationships (Patrick et al., 2001; Wentzel, 1997; Wubbels et al., 1997), and teachers’ beliefs (Artiles, 1996; Brighton, 2003; Hativa et al., 2001; Kane et al., 2002; Pajares, 1992; Pintrich, 1990; Tobin & Fraser, 1989) accounted for the high student ratings they received on the SPOCQ and the MCA. Thus, student perceptions of their teachers’ classroom qualities confirm behaviors and characteristics of effective teachers previously identified in the literature. This study, as well as other research, underscores the importance of teachers who can connect with and challenge their students with meaningful content and instruction.

Many researchers have investigated exemplary teachers, but few have done so by identifying these teachers on the basis of student perceptions of affective factors in the classroom. As such, this research provides new perspectives concerning exemplary teachers, both as identified by their students and as described by the teachers themselves. Thus, this study provides new and helpful empirical information for educational practitioners and researchers.

First, this study provides teachers with information concerning what defined these student-identified exemplary teachers, and in doing so offers some strategies and attributes to which they might aspire. For example, it reveals information regarding good attributes that distinguished these exemplary teachers, such as passion, sense of humor, and high expectations. This study also illustrated students' preferences concerning teachers and classroom qualities, sending an important message for other teachers who want to create learning environments that engage students in important and meaningful learning. For example, teachers can choose to integrate humor with curriculum and instruction and to discuss relevant future directions with their students, as many of the exemplary teachers did in their practice. This study offers insights concerning how other teachers might more effectively connect with their students, and how they might develop positive teacher/student relationships.

Second, findings from this study might be of interest to administrators and teacher educators as they seek to prepare, employ, mentor, and retain quality teachers to work with children and youth in the schools. Clearly, as demonstrated by the exemplary teachers, passion for content as well as for teaching is a quality well received by students. Likewise, sincere interest in their students distinguished these teachers, as did their content knowledge and thirst for quality. We also note, even though these teachers were identified as exemplary by their high student ratings, that not all their administrators believed or recognized them as exemplary teachers. Therefore, we caution that some outstanding and effective teachers might not be recognized as such by administrators or other adults. The implication from this finding is that multiple sources, such as student perceptions, need to be considered in evaluating teacher quality.

Third, these findings offer researchers additional information, this time stemming from students' assessments of their teachers, concerning attributes of exemplary educators. How and under what circumstances these attributes occur and whether they can be developed warrant further research.

In this study, nontraditional course areas such as those found in CTE, gifted education, and art included a disproportionate number of exemplary teachers. These teachers, perhaps because of the nontraditional setting or other factors such as student interest, effectively reached and engaged their students in learning. Demands of high-stakes testing and accountability may have negatively affected teaching in core content areas, resulting in lower ratings by students in these teachers' classes (Amrein & Berliner, 2002; Nichols & Berliner, 2005; Plucker, Burroughs, & Song, 2010). However, general educators might still learn from what occurs in such settings and integrate the relevance that exists in these settings into more traditional content areas. Furthermore, reformers should consider, as the curriculum becomes more narrowed, the potential loss of important alternative learning opportunities for students. As determined in our

study, the majority of our 11,000+ students who responded to the instruments found school only mildly appealing, challenging, or meaningful, and seldom offering them choices. Yet in these 18 teachers' classrooms, all of these constructs were present in abundance. Might it also be possible to make learning and content relevant and meaningful for students in general education settings by connecting general education to career possibilities? Luft (1999) and Taylor (2001) stated that students could increase self-confidence, motivation, and resilience by engaging in their own learning, participating in real-life activities at the worksite, working independently or with others to solve problems, and applying academic and technical knowledge in the workplace. The teachers in this study quite frequently reflected that the learning and content were meaningful and relevant to the students' futures. Almost all of these teachers talked about using real problems and relating learning to the real world and to their students' futures. Many teachers discussed using hands-on activities and integrating meaningful examples from life. Thus, students viewed their learning as powerful, concrete, and they engaged with personal commitment. These teachers can serve as exemplars for other educators who strive to effectively educate their students.

Future Research

It is noteworthy that participants in this study had some unique demographic characteristics. Specifically, the exemplary teachers in this study come from two purposive national samples representative of United States elementary, middle school, and secondary school teachers from a variety of settings (i.e., rural, urban, suburban, public, private, magnet, CTE schools). When compared with national teacher demographics, these exemplary teachers include more male teachers (61% vs. 24.8%), a higher representation of rural teachers (66.7% vs. 17.9%), and greater percentage of teachers with an education beyond a bachelor's degree (55.6% vs. 46.5%). Not all schools from the sample contained exemplary teachers, and these findings offer insights worthy of further investigation. Additionally, the influence of gifted education coursework and training, which was noted by 67% of these teachers, warrants future study to provide insights concerning the role of this training on the quality of teachers. As Hanson and Feldhusen (1994) noted, students whose teachers had received training in gifted education reported that their teachers placed more emphasis on higher level thinking skills and discussion and less emphasis on lecture and grades than did students whose teachers had not received this training.

Findings from this study raise several questions for future research and underscore other questions posed by Robinson and Kolloff (2006) in their thoughtful discussion concerning preparing teachers to work with high-ability youth. Can teachers be taught how to develop positive relationships with students? What role does humor play in teaching and

learning in a broader context? What might CTE and teachers who have professional experiences offer education in general? Can the attributes of the exemplary teachers be used to develop better preservice and in-service teachers? How can passion for content, students, and teaching be assessed and used to recruit and retain quality teachers?

Limitations

With qualitative research, the intent is not to generalize, but rather to inform. Applicability and usefulness of the information is left to the readers' judgment, as we attempt to provide a rich description to inform this judgment. Our sample includes an "overrepresentation" of CTE, rural, and male teachers, due in part to seven teachers in the sample from one exemplary CTE center (Gentry, Rizza, Peters, & Hu, 2005). We do not know whether teachers from other CTE centers would be rated equally as high as these teachers were by their students. Thus, findings should be considered with this in mind.

We were unable to locate nine teachers who met our criterion of 0.75 standard deviations above the aggregated mean scores in the sample, and some of these teachers taught in more traditional areas (e.g., math, science, social studies, language, arts). Thus, we might assume that these teachers would have been similar in their attributes and fit well with the themes we derived from these data, but we really do not know if these assumptions are accurate. We believe further study of student-identified, traditional content-area teachers is warranted. Such inquiry is important because the No Child Left Behind legislation has brought tremendous accountability pressures and a narrowed curricular focus to teachers who teach core content areas—perhaps at the expense of high-quality teaching (Amrein & Berliner, 2002; Nichols & Berliner, 2005), creating widening excellence gaps among students from different racial groups, different income groups, and different levels of English proficiency (Plucker et al., 2010).

We also acknowledge that these teachers were not compared with low-scoring teachers. Thus, although we have a complete picture of how these teachers saw themselves, how they related to their students, and how they approached their craft of teaching, we do not know how they compared with teachers who received far lower scores from their students. The intent of this study was to investigate these teachers, and we recognize in future work the value in comparing these findings to findings that describe teachers whom students rate lower on similar constructs. We also acknowledge that although extensive validation study has been conducted on the MCA and SPOCQ instruments resulting in their use in educational research studies, concurrent validity on these instruments has not been studied, resulting in a limitation to this study.

Finally, many of our teachers came from nontraditional areas. Students may have elected to participate in the nontraditional areas of study, and thus, inherently have been more satisfied with their choices; however of the 18 teachers at the CTE

center, only 7 of the teachers met the criterion. Clearly, choosing a subject area did not result in an exemplary teacher rating, but it may have played a role in this distinction.

Appendix A

Written Survey

Name _____
 e-mail _____
 Phone _____
 Fax _____

Please complete the following open-ended survey and return to XXXXX via e-mail or snail mail.

1. Preferred pseudonym _____
2. Description of your teaching experiences (e.g., number of years, grade levels subjects)
3. Age _____
4. Ethnicity _____
5. Your formal education _____
6. Awards/honors _____
7. Greatest challenge as a teacher _____
8. Greatest achievements as a teacher _____
9. Why do you think distinguishes you from your colleagues in the eyes of your students? _____

Appendix B

Semistructured Interview Protocol

Semistructured interview guiding questions

1. Why did you become a teacher?
2. Describe yourself as a teacher.
3. What would your colleagues say about you as a teacher, your administrator, the students?
4. You were in the top 5% of a national sample of over 400 teachers. Why do you think the kids rated you so highly?
5. How do you know when students are learning?
6. How do you make a difference in the lives of your students?
7. Do you believe you can get through to even the most difficult or unmotivated students, if you really try hard?
8. How would you describe your students in terms of their motivation? Do you use extrinsic incentives to motivate your students (e.g., sticker or token)? Why or why not?
9. Which motivational techniques do you believe are most important and why?

(continued)

Appendix B (continued)

10. How do you address these things (motivation) with your students?
11. What are your views on Appeal, Challenge, Choice, Meaningfulness, and Self-Efficacy? How do you address any/all of these ideas in your classroom?
12. Describe a typical day in your classroom.
13. Tell a story of your professional experience as a teacher that captures what you do.
14. Do you have comments on the written survey you provided?
15. What else would you like to share?

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The authors declared no potential conflicts of interests with respect to the authorship and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The authors received no financial support for the research and/or authorship of this article.

Notes

1. We use the term *exemplary* throughout this article to identify teachers selected for study on the basis of high student scores on the constructs of Appeal, Challenge, Choice, Enjoyment, Interest, Meaningfulness, and Self-efficacy.
2. *Amerasian* was the term the participant used to describe her ethnicity.

References

- Amrein, A. L., & Berliner, D. C. (2002). *An analysis of some unintended and negative consequences of high-stakes testing* (EPSL No. 0211-125-EPRU). Tempe: Arizona State University, Educational Policy Studies Laboratory.
- Artiles, A. J. (1996). Teacher thinking in urban schools: The need for a contextualized research agenda. In F. A. Rios (Ed.), *Teacher thinking in cultural contexts* (pp. 23-52). Albany: State University of New York Press.
- Babbage, K. (2002). *Extreme teaching*. Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press.
- Bishop, W. E. (1968). Successful teachers of the gifted. *Exceptional Children, 34*, 317-325.
- Brighton, C. M. (2003). The effects of middle school teachers' beliefs on classroom practices. *Journal for the Education of the Gifted, 27*, 177-206.
- Cohen, J. (1988). *Statistical power analysis for the behavioral sciences* (2nd ed.). Hillsdale, NJ: Erlbaum.
- Collinson, V. (1996, July 15-18). *Becoming an exemplary teacher: Integrating profession, interpersonal and intrapersonal knowledge* (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED 401 227). Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Japan-United States Teacher Education Consortium, Naruto.
- Costa, A., & Kallick, B. (2000). *Habits of mind: A developmental series*. Alexandria, VA: ASCD.
- Cotton, K. (1995). *Effective schooling practices: A research synthesis 1995 update*. Retrieved from <http://www.nwrel.org/scpd/esp/esp95.html>
- Davis, G. A., & Rimm, S. (2004). *Education of the gifted and talented* (5th ed.). New York, NY: Allyn & Bacon.
- Demmon-Berger, D. (1986). *Effective teaching: Observations from research* (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED 274 087).
- Doyle, W. (1990). Themes in teacher education research. In W. R. Houston (Ed.), *Handbook of research on teacher education: A project of the association of teacher educators*. New York, NY: Macmillan.
- Feldhusen, J. F. (1997). Educating teachers for work with talented youth. In N. Colangelo & G. A. Davis (Eds.), *Handbook for gifted education* (pp. 547-552). Boston, MA: Allyn & Bacon.
- Fenstermacher, G. D. (1979). A philosophical consideration of recent research on teacher effectiveness. In L. S. Shulman (Ed.), *Review of research in education* (Vol. 6, pp. 157-185). Itasca, IL: Peacock.
- Gentry, M., & Gable, R. K. (2001). *My class activities: A survey instrument to assess students' perceptions of interest, challenge, choice and enjoyment in their classrooms* (Instrument). Mansfield Center, CT: Creative Learning Press.
- Gentry, M., & Owen, S. V. (2004). Student perceptions of classroom quality: Differences between honors, AP, and advanced students and students in general classes. *Journal of Secondary Gifted Education, 16*, 20-29.
- Gentry, M., Rizza, M. G., Peters, S., & Hu, S. (2005). Professionalism, sense of community, and reason to learn: Lessons from an exemplary Career and Technical Education Center. *Journal of Career and Technical Education Research, 30*, 47-85.
- Gentry, M., & Springer, P. (2002). Secondary student perceptions of their class activities regarding meaningfulness, challenge, choice, and appeal: An initial instrument validation study. *Journal of Secondary Gifted Education, 13*, 192-204.
- Good, T., & Brophy, J. (1994). *Looking in classrooms* (6th ed.). New York, NY: HarperCollins.
- Hansen, J. B., & Feldhusen, J. F. (1994). Comparison of trained and untrained teachers of gifted students. *Gifted Child Quarterly, 38*(3), 115-121. doi: 10.1177/001698629403800304
- Hativa, N., Barak, R., & Simhi, E. (2001). Exemplary university teachers: Knowledge and beliefs regarding effective teaching dimensions and strategies. *Journal of Higher Education, 72*, 699-729.
- Kagan, D. M. (1992). Implications of research on teacher belief. *Educational Psychologist, 27*, 65-90.
- Kane, R., Sandretto, S., & Heath, C. (2002). Telling half story: A critical review of research on the teaching beliefs and practices of university academics. *Review of Educational Research, 72*, 177-228.
- Leithwood, K. (1990). The principal's role in teacher development. In B. Joyce (Ed.), *Changing school culture through staff development* (pp. 71-90). Washington, DC: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.
- Luft, V. D. (1999). School to careers: How agricultural education can contribute. *Agricultural Education Magazine, 72*, 20-21.
- Mills, C. J. (2003). Characteristics of effective teachers of gifted students: Teacher background and personality styles

- of students. *Gifted Child Quarterly*, 47(4), 272-281. doi: 10.1177/001698620304700404
- National Board for Professional Teaching Standards. (1998). *Policy position*. Retrieved from <http://www.nbpts.org/nbpts/standards/policy.html>
- National Center for Education Statistics. (2006). *Characteristics of schools, districts, teachers, principals, and school libraries in the United States, 2003-04 schools and staffing survey*. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education. Retrieved from <http://nces.ed.gov/pubsearch/pubsinfo.asp?pubid=2006313>
- National Council for the Accreditation of Teacher Educators. (2000). *The standard of excellence in teacher preparation*. Retrieved from <http://www.ncate.org/>
- Nichols, S. L., & Berliner, D. C. (2005). *The inevitable corruption of indicators and educators through high-stakes testing* (EPSS-0503-101-EPRU). Tempe, AZ: Arizona State University, Educational Policy Studies Laboratory.
- Pajares, M. F. (1992). Teachers' beliefs and educational research: Cleaning up a messy construct. *Review of Educational Research*, 62, 307-332.
- Patrick, H., Anderman, L. H., Ryan, A. M., Edelin, K. C., & Midgley, C. (2001). Teachers' communication of goal orientations in four fifth-grade classrooms. *Elementary School Journal*, 102, 35-58.
- Patrick, H., Turner, J. C., Meyer, D. K., & Midgley, C. (2003). How teachers establish psychological environments during the first days of school: Associations with avoidance in mathematics. *Teachers College Record*, 105, 1521-1558.
- Pereira, N., Peters, S. J., & Gentry, M. (in press). The *My Class Activities* instrument as used in Saturday enrichment program evaluation. *Journal for Advanced Academics*.
- Pintrich, P. R. (1990). Implications of psychological research on student learning and college teaching for teacher education. In W. R. Houston (Ed.), *Handbook of research on teacher education: a project of the association of teacher educators* (pp. 826-857). New York, NY: Macmillan.
- Plucker, J. A., Burroughs, N., & Song, R. (2010). *Mind the (other) gap: The growing excellence gap in K-12 education*. Bloomington: Center for Evaluation and Education Policy, Indiana University.
- Roberts, J. L. (2006). Teachers of secondary gifted students. In F. A. Dixon & S. M. Moon, *The handbook of secondary gifted education* (pp. 567-580). Waco, TX: Prufrock.
- Robinson, A. (2008). Teacher characteristics. In J. A. Plucker, & C. M. Callahan (Eds.), *Critical issues and practices in gifted education* (pp. 669-680). Waco, TX: Prufrock.
- Robinson, A., & Kolloff, P. K. (2006). Preparing teachers to work with high-ability youth at the secondary level. In F. A. Dixon, & S. M. Moon, *The handbook of secondary gifted education* (pp. 581-610). Waco, TX: Prufrock.
- Robinson, A., Shore, B. M., & Enerson, D. L. (2007). *Best practices in gifted education*. Waco, TX: Prufrock.
- Strauss, A. L., & Corbin, J. (1990). *Basics of qualitative research: Grounded theory procedures and techniques*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage.
- Taylor, S. (2001). *Getting employers involved: Improving work-based learning through employer links. Report and good practice guidelines* (ED 454414). London, England: Learning and Skills Development Agency.
- Thompson, G. L., Warren, S. R., Foy, T., & Dickerson, C. (2008). What makes a teacher outstanding?: A contrast of teachers' and African American high school students' perspectives. *Journal of Urban Learning, Teaching, and Research*, 4, 122-134.
- Tobin, K., & Fraser, B. J. (1989). Barriers to higher-level cognitive learning in high school science. *Science Education*, 73, 659-682.
- Tomlinson, J., Little, V., Tomlinson, S., & Bower, E. (2000). Educated for the 21st century? *Children & Society*, 14, 243-253.
- U.S. Census Bureau. (2004). *People: Race and ethnicity*. Retrieved from http://factfinder.census.gov/jsp/saff/SAFFInfo.jsp?geo_id=04000US09&_geoContext=01000US%7C04000US09&_street=&_county=&_cityTown=&_state=04000US09&_zip=&_content=tp9_race_ethnicity.html&_watermark=people_watermark.gif&_gnId=0&_gtId=0&_title=Race+and+Ethnicity&_lang=en&_sse=on
- Wentzel, K. R. (1997). Student motivation in middle school: The role of perceived pedagogical caring. *Journal of Educational Psychology*, 89, 411-419.
- Wubbels, T., Levy, J., & Brekelmans, M. (1997). Paying attention to relationships. *Educational Leadership*, 54, 82-86.

Bios

Marcia Gentry is the Director of the Gifted Education Resource Institute and Professor of Gifted, Creative, and Talented Studies at Purdue University where she directs graduate studies in GCT education. Her research has focused on the use of cluster grouping and differentiation, the application of gifted education pedagogy to improve teaching and learning, student perceptions of school, and on nontraditional services and underserved populations. She chairs the AERA SIG, Research on Giftedness, Creativity, and Talent, actively participates in NAGC, frequently contributes to the gifted education literature, and regularly serves as a speaker and consultant. She is currently working with colleagues to make developing talents among Native American children a national priority.

Saiying Steenbergen-Hu is a postdoctoral fellow in the Department of Psychology and Neuroscience at Duke University. She earned a PhD degree in educational psychology from Purdue University. Her research interests include meta-analysis, research evidence synthesis, research methods, research design, use of research for policy and practices, accelerated learning, motivation, teacher education, second language learning, and classroom communication.

Byung-yeon Choi is a professor of educational psychology in the Department of Elementary Education at Jeonju National University of Education in Korea. He was a postdoctoral fellow with the Gifted Education Resource Institute at Purdue University. His research interests include education of gifted and talented students, creativity, motivation to learn, learning and instruction, and teacher education.