"You Could Be Doing Brain Surgery": Gifted Girls Becoming Teachers

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“You Could Be Doing Brain Surgery”: Gifted Girls Becoming Teachers

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Abstract: This qualitative study focuses on messages to gifted girls about their choice of a career in teaching. Participants consisted of 18 female teachers identified as gifted. The methodology consisted of semistructured interviews and focus group discussions. Findings indicate that messages of discouragement toward a career in teaching were more numerous and more emphatic than were messages of encouragement. Despite this, these participants were content with and remained committed to teaching careers for the foreseeable future. Participants also mentioned a variety of ways in which their giftedness interacted with their teaching, for their own benefit and that of their students. Recommendations for counselors, teachers, and parents include providing information about the entire range of career options and carefully matching career pathways with the student’s interests and dreams rather than the adult’s preconceived notions of success or prestige.

Putting the Research to Use: There is little question that our society desperately needs teachers who are gifted. Yet gifted students who express an interest in a teaching career are often discouraged by family members, friends, teachers, and counselors. Although it is appropriate to encourage gifted students to pursue careers that might be perceived by society as more prestigious than teaching, it is counterproductive to guide students into careers inconsistent with their interests and values. By the time they are in high school, students who are interested in teaching have often sought out opportunities to interact with children and have engaged in activities such as playing school. These activities indicate the desire to teach, a desire that should be taken seriously. As Delisle (1998, p. 21) put it, “My hope is that . . . we will lecture less and listen more, giving academic and career guidance based upon individual interest patterns rather than preordained societal benchmarks of success.” In addition, students should engage in discussions regarding ways in which their intellectual talents may be challenged in teaching to the benefit of all.

Keywords: gifted; female; careers; teaching

Although many (e.g., Flack, 1989) decry the lack of talent among students choosing to be teachers, and although at least one program has been developed to encourage gifted high school students to pursue careers in teaching (Cassidy & Klinedinst, 1991), the message to many gifted young people is that teaching is a waste of their gifts (Kerr, 1990). Gifted students are encouraged to pursue high-status, prestigious careers, and teaching does not qualify. Indeed, the status of teaching in the United States is hardly of the same stature as engineering, for example, which requires the same length and type of training (Hollinger & Fleming, 1992). Some researchers have even characterized teaching as a “semiprofession” (Whatley, 1998).

Although women constitute 97% of the nation’s preschool and kindergarten teachers, 81% of elementary and middle school teachers, and 57% of secondary school teachers (U.S. Department of Labor, 2007), the appeal of a career in education for today’s gifted young women is in question. As women’s career options have expanded into traditionally male fields, gifted women are encouraged into high-level, prestigious careers, and

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rightly so. Careers that have traditionally been considered “female” garner lower salaries and prestige than those considered “male” (Garrison, Stronge, & Smith, 1986; Novack & Novack, 1996). Possibly for those reasons, Kelly (1993) found that school achievement was inversely related to interest in traditionally female careers for both male and female students. In another study that compared gifted students, high achievers, creative students, and regular students, all four groups ranked teaching and sales as the lowest occupational choices (Kher-Durlabhji, Lacina-Gifford, Carter, & Laland, 1997).

The effect of giftedness on career development and aspirations of male and female students is apparently quite complex. Kerr (1983) found that gifted girls were more likely to have lower career aspirations than were gifted boys, and in her summary of 15 years of research, Eccles (1994) stated that women still flock to traditional professions. Eccles attributed this trend to gender socialization modes and discrimination toward women in male-dominated fields. In contrast to these findings, Mendez (2000) found that gifted young adolescent women aspired to careers that were more nontraditional, required more education, and carried more prestige than careers chosen by a peer group in general education. Kelly and Colangelo (1990) found that gifted students had higher levels of career maturity than did students who pursued the regular curriculum or had identified special needs and that there was no difference between genders on career maturity. Leung, Conoley, and Scheel (1994) also found that there was no difference between genders in level of aspiration, but their sample of girls seemed more flexible in considering occupations regardless of traditional gender roles. As Perrone (1997) concluded, “Gifted women receive conflicting and confusing signals from society relative to the level of career that is deemed appropriate and the specific fields that are considered gender-appropriate” (p. 406). Greene (2003) also identified conflicts between career aspirations and society’s expectations for women as difficulties in the career development of gifted girls.

Compounding this issue, the emphasis on holding high aspirations may deter talented girls from entering teaching—a “lesser profession.” Studies of occupational success, often equating success with prestige and income (Arnold, 1993), may even consider gifted women who enter teaching underachievers. Eccles (1985) stated, “[Gifted females] are overrepresented in the fields of education and literature and underrepresented in science, math, and engineering. Most importantly, they are, in fact, underrepresented in almost all advanced educational programs and in the vast majority of high-status occupations” (p. 261).

Walker, Reis, and Leonard (1992) further investigated the “current trend of underachievement in women” (p. 201) by surveying 544 women from a highly selective East Coast school for gifted female students. These women represented each of the decades from the 1910s to the 1980s. “Of those who listed an occupational field, almost half (46%) entered the field of education...consistent with the traditional sex-role stereotype” (Walker et al., 1992, p. 204). Maxwell (2007) concluded that “many studies confirm that highly capable female students often do not achieve in the same numbers as their male counterparts and choose careers that do not correspond with their intellectual abilities” (p. 210). Entering careers traditionally thought of as female is apparently considered undesirable for gifted women. However, “women may define ‘achievement’ or ‘success’ in ways substantially different from the traditional masculine definitions” (Hollinger & Fleming, 1992, p. 208).

Eccles (1994) extended this argument, stating that data have not been gathered regarding the meaning attached to achievement-related activities. Following a thorough synthesis of the research literature, Eccles et al. (1983, as cited in Eccles, 1994) presented a comprehensive model of women’s achievement-related choices. This model relates these choices to two sets of beliefs: the individual’s expectations for success in a given field and the importance or value of the field to the individual. The beliefs are mediated by gender role beliefs and the differential input given to girls and boys by parents and teachers, among other factors. Eccles reported the finding that girls are more willing to make occupational sacrifices for their family and to value a career that allows them to help others and do something worthwhile for society. Such career choices are accompanied by perceived costs, such as lower pay, prestige, or both, or disappointing others. Kirkpatrick (1999) investigated messages received by gifted women regarding intelligence and femininity and discovered themes similar to those of Eccles, as well as conflicts between the messages. The two conflicts of relevance here are the conflict between demands of relationships versus the demands of careers and the conflict between perceived intelligence and perceived desirability.
Following the same thinking, Delisle (1998) argued that “we may be sending the wrong message to both sexes: that self-worth is defined by the career you choose, and that personal success is measured by prestige, not happiness” (p. 21). Should not gifted women be encouraged to follow their own dreams, even if those dreams involve traditionally female, low-prestige careers? Yet the research continues to lament these choices, invalidating these goals for women. As Delisle wrote, “Where is it stated in the research—specifically and explicitly—that teaching and nursing and other traditionally female careers are appropriate if girls’ hearts, minds, and passions lead them in these directions?” (p. 20). Jordan’s (2006) work implied that talented women who become teachers resisted “official narratives’ power to author them in these positions . . . to allow them spaces within which they may live their own stories” (p. 2820). Reis (2003) concurred, in acknowledging that some talented women have made conscious choices that have enabled them to find personal happiness in work that makes a difference and is meaningful to them. In their model of female talent development, Noble, Subotnik, and Arnold (1996) recognized that a gifted woman may choose a life path in which she becomes “a self-actualized individual who positively influences people around her” (p. 429). According to the model, this personal domain of self-actualization is one of three ways in which women realize their potentials; the others are in the public domain of leadership and the public domain of eminence. However, as noted by Greene (2003), while valuing such a sense of personal mission, it is important to ensure that the sometimes harsh realities (such as lower pay and prestige) are clearly understood during the early stages of career planning.

Gifted girls are influenced in making career decisions by peers, family, and school environment (Nelson & Smith, 2001) and by factors such as service to others, familial expectations, and desires to combine career with motherhood. Leroux (1986) found that service to others was important to women (but not to men) in choosing their careers. In Reis’s (1995) study, the women who indicated total satisfaction with their careers (30% of the sample) believed that their “career mission in life was to work for and with those who needed them” (p. 168). Emmett and Minor (1993) found that the desire to help others was strong in gifted young men and women, but in their study the most important factor for both genders in making career decisions was heightened sensitivity to the expectations of others; ironically, this was also the most likely source of difficulty in making such decisions. Nelson and Smith (2001) advised that peers, family, and teachers offer more support and encouragement in the career development of gifted girls. Erwin and Stewart (1997) concluded that parents were ambivalent about their daughters’ goals to combine career and family; one participant stated about a friend that her parents told her that teaching was “Ok because you can manage a family, too. . . . Not that it’s an important job” (p. 216). Hébert (2000) found in his study of gifted male elementary education majors that they had received support from parents and family members, although the strength of the support was lukewarm: Parents were said to be “open-minded” when they made their career decisions, or told their sons, “If that’s what you want to do we’ll support you” or they “would not stand in their way”(pp. 31-32). Similarly, Novack and Novack (1996) reported that women are overtly told to be whatever they want to be, yet subconsciously sent messages that traditional feminine roles are preferred. Three of the seven gifted college women studied by Grant, Battle, and Heggoy (2000) majored in education, although one vacillated between education and business, and two eventually entered teaching. These gifted women were influenced both positively and negatively by parents and others, among other influences. Similarly, Hollinger and Fleming (1993) found that resistance from family members was one type of barrier to fulfilling career goals. Thus, girls may be discouraged from entering certain careers by parents, counselors, or teachers (Grau, 1985). Indeed, some gifted girls may be counseled away from teaching careers or told they are too smart to be teachers (Whatley, 1998). In an effort to change the culture of inadequate or negative career counseling for gifted students, Greene (2003) suggested that professionals consider career counseling that includes a lifespan approach and includes personality type, values, desired lifestyle, and societal trends in addition to ability.

Some of the participants in the study by Erwin and Stewart (1997) perceived a gap between the type of work they desired and its compatibility with child rearing. Teaching appeared to be a compromise career acceptable to some (“That’s a career that allows you to plan for home life”; p. 213). Similarly, in her study of gifted female graduate students, Reis (1995, 1998) found that many had great difficulties reconciling their talents, careers, and family responsibilities. Although 60% of this group were satisfied with their careers, a significant number indicated that they would have chosen otherwise had they perceived
other available options. Many in this group chose traditional female careers such as teaching and nursing almost by default—because those careers were perceived by family members to be compatible with child rearing. Some of the women reported that teaching was a “compromise,” “an easier route,” or “unfulfilling.” These compromises frequently led to personal and/or professional dissatisfaction in these women. Although acknowledging that “our society has a critical need for those who excel in traditionally female careers such as teaching” (p. 170), Reis (1998) concluded that “we must encourage gifted young women to broaden their career considerations beyond currently accepted traditional careers for women” (p. 170).

An additional confounding factor is multipotentiality (Maxwell, 2007; Silverman, 1993), although Greene (2003) shed doubt on its importance. Because gifted men and women have the capabilities to succeed in many different fields, making a choice creates anxiety, disappointment, and even depression at giving up dreams or not being able to “do it all.” Gifted teenage girls’ scores on career assessment instruments tend to be undifferentiated, showing interests and talents in multiple fields (Maxwell, 2007). Instead of finding the one career that matches the student’s profile, the search is for the career that is most consonant with the person’s deeply held values (Silverman, 1993), again relating to the work of Eccles (1994). This stance would be in agreement with that of Greene (2003), who stated that gifted young persons are more likely to be multidimensional than multipotential. Her recommendation was to provide training for gifted students in decision-making skills and to explore other aspects of their lives, such as values, life goals, and hobbies, in considering career options.

One is left with the impression that gifted women who choose to be teachers could have done much more important work. The status and accomplishments associated with teaching are not highly valued in our society. Yet teaching can be a fulfilling, challenging career for women who are gifted (Whatley, 1998), and the nation’s young people could certainly benefit from having gifted persons as teachers (Hébert, 2000). This study investigates the reasons that female teachers who have been identified as gifted chose that career, the encouragement and discouragement they have received from others regarding their career choice, and the interactions between their own giftedness and their teaching experiences.

Method

Participants

Participants consisted of 18 White female students in several undergraduate or graduate education courses at one campus of a large, northeastern land-grant university. The participants volunteered to participate in the study, and 15 of them fit the following criteria: being identified as gifted as a child or adolescent and having chosen teaching as a career, as shown in Table 1. In accordance with the cautions of Noble et al. (1996), I invited 3 additional participants who had not been identified as gifted in school, but who had an outstanding educational record and had demonstrated in class at least three of the following gifted characteristics: perfectionism, depth and perceptiveness of questioning, ability to make abstract connections between concepts, verbal expression reflecting a broad general knowledge base, receptiveness to challenge, or quick grasp of difficult concepts, described in Table 2. Participants were selectively chosen to represent a range of ages and maximize the variability of specialty areas within education. They ranged in age from early 20s to 50 and had 0 (preservice education majors) to 8 years of teaching experience. Twelve were certified or pursuing certification in elementary education, 6 in secondary education; 10 were undergraduate students and 8 were graduate students. More details regarding participants are found in Table 3. During the interviews, each participant provided additional evidence of her giftedness in discussing awards and honors received, challenging coursework taken, and the like. Participants were added until no new categories or properties were forthcoming.

Design and Data Gathering

This was a qualitative study using semistructured interviews as the method of gathering data. Each participant took part in an interview lasting 30-60 min. Although the majority of interviews were conducted in person, two interviews occurred via e-mail. All face-to-face interviews were audiotaped and later transcribed. Interviews followed a questioning protocol (see the Appendix), with follow-up questions included to clarify points as needed. In addition, when tentative findings were reached, two focus group discussions were held, one for undergraduates (4 participants) and one for graduate students (3 participants). The focus groups served two purposes: to allow these women to synergistically augment each others’ stories with their own similar and dissimilar
experiences and to serve as a member check for the credibility of the findings.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using analytic induction (Goetz & LeCompte, 1984) and constant comparison (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) methods. Data were read repeatedly until themes began to emerge. Data were first analyzed for each individual participant, then across participants’ responses to a single question. Responses to each question were juxtaposed into a “composite interview” to aid in cross-case comparisons. Themes were then dimensionalized using selective coding, considering varieties of conditions, strategies, interactions, or consequences that might be associated with the category or that might alter the manifestation of the category (Strauss, 1987). For example, the property relating to reactions of family and friends to the participants’ career choice was dimensionalized to reveal first the broad groupings of positive and negative reactions, then further examined to elicit the reasons for these reactions and their impact on the participants’ commitment to the profession. Each of these more specific findings was then investigated for its presence, absence, and/or manner of influencing each participant.

Participants were given transcripts of their interviews and asked to “correct errors of fact and to challenge interpretations” (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 314). No such corrections occurred, although participants elaborated on their earlier comments with anecdotes of events or further revelations occurring during the interim. During the focus groups, participants also reacted to others’ comments, often echoing their experiences.

Results

As an introduction to the results, I present two vignettes of participants’ experiences that highlight two very different pathways into teaching, but similar commitments to the profession.

Nancy is a preservice teacher in her early 20s. She had been in gifted programs since first grade, but struggled significantly with the Imposter Phenomenon (Clance & Imes, 1978) in middle and high school. Her parents—both highly intelligent but not college educated—told her that she could do anything and not to think that because she was a girl that she couldn’t have any career she wanted. Nancy has always enjoyed working with children and can’t remember when she actually decided to be a teacher, but she vividly recalls the reactions to her career choice of her friends in high school and, more recently, her husband. They would give her strange looks, ask why she would ever want to do that, and tell her that she could be doing much more challenging and prestigious work. She frequently perceives that when told of her career choice, people assume that she is not very smart, that education is an easy major, and that teaching is an easy job. Nevertheless, Nancy remains committed to teaching, plans to earn her master’s degree in education, and is considering specializing in gifted education. She states that “there is a lot wrong with the world today, and I think a lot of that could not necessarily be changed but at least be influenced, especially [through working] with younger students.” Nancy believes that on one hand being gifted gives her insight into different ways of approaching and integrating her teaching content and makes her committed to individualizing for her students, and on the other hand sometimes frustrates her when students don’t grasp ideas as quickly as she does.
Carol is a 50-year-old teacher of applied calculus and basic algebra. Teaching is her third career but her first love. Although her goal was always to become a teacher, she worked as an engineering technician for General Electric in the research and development lab, then pursued a cake decorating business for several years, during which she taught beginner and advanced decorating courses. There were no gifted programs available to her in school, but she was selected to take the first-ever AP calculus course in her high school. She was encouraged by her family to choose teaching as a career, and as a child was given presents such as chalk boards and globes that she used in playing school with her younger brothers. She was the president of the Future Teachers of America, where she worked with a mentor teacher and was allowed to teach portions of his class. She substituted for years before she became certified and was asked by other teachers why she wasn’t working full time because her love and enthusiasm for teaching shone through. Carol feels that “an intelligent person is better able to make connections in the subject matter, think faster and clearer on their feet, and not be afraid of student questions.” She also feels that an intelligent teacher can better understand the different levels of intelligence and different learning styles in the classroom.

Nancy’s and Carol’s stories foreshadow the two main categories emerging from the data: the choice of a teaching career and interactions of teaching and participants’ own giftedness. Table 4 provides a summary of the major results.

### Choice of Teaching as a Career

Interview responses that centered around the choice of a teaching career resulted in three main properties: the reasons for choosing teaching as a career, family members’ and friends’ reactions to this choice, and the participants’ levels of commitment to remaining in teaching.

#### Reasons for choosing a teaching career

As youths, 9 of the participants had worked with younger children in volunteer settings, such as camp, church school, tutoring, coaching, and babysitting, and had enjoyed these interactions:

> Well, I started as a kid. When I was 12 or 13, I started working with smaller kids, like preschool age kids. And I just always enjoyed working with children. (Kelly)

Several participants mentioned choosing teaching because of their own enjoyment of learning and the desire to pass on that joy. Others described differently how they found fulfillment in teaching:

Table 3

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pseudonym</th>
<th>Classification</th>
<th>Certification Level</th>
<th>Years of Experience</th>
<th>First Career/Major</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Bridget</td>
<td>G</td>
<td>Elementary</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Carol</td>
<td>G</td>
<td>Secondary math</td>
<td>2*</td>
<td>Engineering tech</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Charlotte</td>
<td>G</td>
<td>Secondary English</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>Journalism</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grace</td>
<td>PB</td>
<td>Elementary</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>Law/social work</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Heather</td>
<td>G</td>
<td>Elementary</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Nursing/speech pathology</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jane</td>
<td>PB</td>
<td>Secondary math</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>Computer science</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jen</td>
<td>G</td>
<td>Elementary</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>Education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jo</td>
<td>U</td>
<td>Elementary</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>Meteorology</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Katherine</td>
<td>G</td>
<td>Elementary</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>Psychology</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kelly</td>
<td>G</td>
<td>Elementary</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Linda</td>
<td>PB</td>
<td>Secondary math</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>Psychology/premed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lisa</td>
<td>U</td>
<td>Elementary</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>Education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maya</td>
<td>U</td>
<td>Elementary</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>Education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nancy</td>
<td>U</td>
<td>Elementary</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>Agriculture</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pam</td>
<td>U</td>
<td>Elementary</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>Education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Patti</td>
<td>U</td>
<td>Secondary math</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>Electrical engineering</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sharon</td>
<td>G</td>
<td>Secondary science</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>Medical technology</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stacy</td>
<td>U</td>
<td>Elementary</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>Education</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. G = graduate student; U = undergraduate student; PB = postbaccalaureate student pursuing initial teacher certification.

*Carol also had 13 years of experience as a substitute teacher.*
It’s just a really, really great idea to think about going to work each day and loving what I’m doing and having a great time and, you know, making a difference at the same time. (Nancy)

I just decided that teaching would probably be more fulfilling. I’m not really interested in money. (Pam)

I really think it’s a “calling”—I LOVED explaining my job as a Med Tech to people who asked. I loved training new techs when I had the opportunity. (Sharon)

I think that gifted people just have that love to learn, and I think that’s why it affected me so much because I wanted to have other people learn in front of me and have me be able to help them be knowledgeable of things. (Maya)

Linda stated that she “stumbled” onto teaching:

I saw an ad in the paper that they needed emergency substitute teachers and I thought, “Well, I’ll try that.” . . . And I really, really enjoyed it.

Only 1 of the participants, majoring in secondary mathematics in which more teaching positions are available in the geographical area, mentioned extrinsic reasons for choosing a career in teaching:

I know that there’s a lot of job openings in our school. (Patti)

Thus, love of working with children, commitment to engendering the joy of learning, and personal fulfillment were the major reasons these participants chose teaching careers. This clearly illustrates the value dimension of the Eccles et al. (1983, as cited in Eccles, 1994) model. The messages they received regarding this choice from family and friends are described in the following section.

Reactions of family members and friends to choice of a teaching career. Only 8 of the participants reported that those close to them had encouraged them to become teachers; 3 were told to “do whatever will make you happy,” and 7 were not encouraged to choose teaching. However, not encouraging is not the same as discouraging: Of the participants, 12 were actively discouraged from choosing teaching, and 6 were not discouraged by anyone. (These numbers add to more than the number of participants because several received different messages from different people.)

Encouragement. Parents and friends of 6 of the participants sent both indirect and direct messages of support for choosing a career in teaching:

I must say that I was encouraged to choose teaching as a career. My parents knew that the birthday gifts I cherished were things such as a globe, a desk, a real chalkboard (my dad made two at his job out of real slate), and any other items such as workbooks that I could use to “play school” with my three younger brothers. (Carol)

Well, my mom did, but that’s because she’s a teacher. And she said, “I see the way you react to the kids and how they react to you,” and she just thought it would be a very fulfilling line of work. And of course I didn’t listen to her [then] because she’s my mother. (Jo)

My boyfriend [encouraged me]. I was in 11th grade—I remember the day exactly. And I was just feeling so pressured. It was like I had to know what I wanted to do right then and there and I still had a year of school left. And it was just like I said, you know, “Help me, can you help me?” Then he said, “Well, you know, you have so much patience, you’re so good with understanding and that sort of thing. I really think you’d make a good teacher.” (Pam)

Pam’s statement relates to Greene’s (2003) conclusion that adolescents find the career decision-making process to be stressful and just want it to be finished, and therefore rely on the opinions of their friends. In this case, Pam’s friend was astute in his analysis of her values and life goals, and Pam remained committed to teaching several years later.

Interestingly, the 2 oldest participants reported strong encouragement from family members, without accompanying discouragement. For the remainder of the participants, however, messages of support were often contradicted by others who actively discouraged them from choosing teaching as a career.

Discouragement. The participants were given a number of reasons for not becoming teachers. Several received the implication that they had the ability to do more “valuable” work:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 4</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Category and Properties Emerging From the Data</td>
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<tr>
<td>Category</td>
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<tr>
<td>Choice of a teaching career</td>
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<td>Interactions of teaching with giftedness</td>
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As far as the teachers and guidance counselors and things like that, or even, you know, friends, or my husband, they kind of give you the feeling, this attitude like, “You have so much more potential—why are you doing that? You could be doing, I don’t know, brain surgery or whatever.” . . . When I was in high school, my 11th- and 12th-grade years, people would just give me strange looks when they would ask me, “What are you going to do or what are you planning to go to school for?” And I would say teaching and they would just go “Whatever . . . why are you doing that?” . . . It’s been kind of tough for me because I kind of feel like I say education’s my major and people judge me and that’s it. People just assume, “Oh, she’s not that smart.” (Nancy)

I’d say maybe my grandfather [discouraged me], because ever since I was little he has always expected a lot out of me and I think he was waiting for me to go into something, you know, huge and make a lot of money. (Pam)

I have had people say, “Why are you doing that? Why don’t you do something . . . you know, you got such good grades in high school, you could be a scientist or a doctor.” (Lisa)

These comments are reminiscent of Whatley’s (1998) findings, in which 1 participant was told she was “too smart to be an educator” (p. 117), and Emmett and Minor’s (1993) research, in which 1 participant said, “My dad had expectations of me doing really well” (p. 355). Kirkpatrick (1999) referred to these as messages regarding intelligence, which include the importance of meeting others’ expectations and the emphasis on living up to one’s potential. The comments also relate to Erwin and Stewart’s (1997) conclusion that some of their participants were concerned that their career choices would disappoint their loved ones, representing a “perceived cost” of their choice in the Eccles et al. (1983, as cited in Eccles, 1994) model. Before settling on teaching as a career, Heather had even had a similar attitude about teaching:

I used to think, why do I want to be a teacher? I go to school to become something, why would I want to go back and be a teacher and teach all these kids to be something and I never became something? But I don’t feel like that anymore.

Many participants expressed some level of distress at the lack of appreciation expressed for teaching as a profession and the lack of respect teachers receive. Perhaps related to this, some participants received strong messages that they should not become teachers because of the low prestige level:

My one friend Missy sort of acted like I was degrading myself in a way because we were both engineers and she thought an engineer was more prestigious than a math major. . . . [And my parents] absolutely went ballistic. They were all very disappointed that I would, like I said, degrade myself, is what they were thinking, Low prestige level. (Patti)

Not that teaching is looked down upon, but I think my parents were more . . . they were very into the lawyer thing. . . . I don’t know if it’s really valued as much as other things I might have pursued. (Grace)

Both comments relate to Emmett and Minor’s (1993) participant who stated, “I’d like to have a job that’s somewhat respected” (p. 355). Of course part of the “respect” factor is fame and money. To capitalize on both of these, Jo was encouraged by friends to apply her talents to a career in the performing arts:

Well, they told me that I should have gone into acting or singing, and I basically said, “Well, I can use those in the classroom, so I’m not wasting my talents.” And they said, “Well, you can make a lot more money.” And basically I just gave them a look that said, “I’m not wasting anything if I’m in the classroom teaching.” But they didn’t agree. But this is my life.

Here Jo echoes one of Whatley’s (1998) participants, who stated that “education has always been somewhat of a performing art to me” (p. 119). In contrast to Jo’s experience of being advised on a specific career direction, other participants, after stating their desire to teach, received vague messages that they should seek another career choice, for no specified reason:

I’ve had a lot of people tell me I’m nuts. (Linda)

I have had people tell me that I would be good at other things. (Bridget)

In school we would have to see the guidance counselor every now and then, and they would say just keep your options open, because I was always very set on becoming a teacher ever since I was little. (Maya)

Interestingly, all of these 3 participants had earlier responded that no one had discouraged them from being a teacher, but had then responded with these comments. Heather was discouraged by her parents, both teachers, because of the stresses of the profession:

They said, “No, no, no, you don’t want to be a teacher.” Because they said there’s so many politics and fighting and nobody agrees, and they said there’s so much paperwork and stress.
Ironically, Bridget still received messages of discouragement near the completion of her master’s degree:

Now that I’m getting closer and closer to my master’s degree, I’m hearing more and more from family and friends, “Well, so now what are you going to do?” I guess now that I am quote “more educated” and have another degree, now teaching isn’t good enough anymore.

Hence, the messages of discouragement were stated more strongly and were more numerous than those of encouragement. Even many years after the incidents, some of the participants still had very strong emotional responses to the negative messages they had received about their choice of a career:

I’m still struggling with it sometimes where I feel like, “Man, I really sold myself short.” (Nancy)

It’s unfortunate that a lot of people seem to have the impression that teaching is a “lower” profession. . . . [It was] almost insulting, too, like I should be doing something more profound, but I don’t think there should be any penalty for wanting to teach. It really upset me. (Linda)

The opinion that teaching is seen as a waste of talent brings to mind the 19-year-old man in the study by Emmett and Minor (1993) who said, “My father’s convinced that I have the brains to do physics—why waste it on special education?” (p. 355). This perception may have heightened the angst shown in both focus groups in reaction to frustration with the perceived low public opinion of teachers. In response to a relative who was disparaging teaching, Katherine reacted heatedly:

I stood up and I said, “Did you forget that I am a teacher?” And he was like, “Yes, I guess I just didn’t know you really felt that way, felt that strongly about it.” And I said, “Well, I guess that’s my fault for not portraying how important I think this job is. You know it’s not always about money. I was an honor student. I was in the National Honor Society. I could have been anything I wanted to be. Do you know that?”

Thus, many of these participants felt that they had become teachers in spite of the sentiments of their family and friends, rather than because of their support. Their defensiveness of their chosen profession helped to illuminate their commitment to it.

Commitment to Teaching

Despite the opinions of those close to them, most participants retained a strong commitment to remaining in the profession for the foreseeable future. Only 1 participant mentioned that she would not choose teaching again. Sixteen of the participants still see themselves in education in 10 years, some perhaps in a different role than classroom teacher. Seven spontaneously mentioned pursuing additional degrees in education.

In summary, most participants chose teaching as a career for altruistic reasons and remained steadfast in their choice despite mixed messages from those close to them. The second major category emerging from the data concerns the various interactions of the participants’ own giftedness with their teaching.

Interactions of Teaching With Giftedness

When asked how being gifted affected their teaching, 5 of the participants stated that they did not consider themselves to be of above-average intelligence, despite ample evidence to the contrary. This conforms to Kerr’s (1985) finding that gifted women often repudiate the label of giftedness and insist they are “normal” (p. 9), and it echoes the statement “I don’t believe I am intellectually gifted” (Walker et al., 1992, p. 206). Still, all participants were able to articulate ways in which their intellectual prowess affected their interactions with students.

Positive effects. Most of the effects mentioned were deemed beneficial. Some were related to classroom organization and management:

I think I read the kids a lot quicker than some people might, and I can kind of tell who I need to adjust things for and how to adapt. (Maya)

I’m able to think about the classroom setup and schedule the day, and a lot of that takes a lot of thinking. (Katherine)

I think I’m good at sensing various things at once. (Jane)

I think that I’m very aware of other people’s motivations or justifications for their behaviors. (Grace)

Other positive effects were related to instructional and planning skills:

Just seeing things from different angles and putting things together a little more. (Nancy)

I think my creativity has an effect. . . . So I think that certainly has an effect on my ability to come up with creative lesson plans and that kind of thing. (Jen)
I can probably look at [topics] from a more creative point of view. (Linda)

I’ve been thinking a lot about [how giftedness affects my teaching] lately especially with higher order thinking. I’d just love to bring that stuff to the classroom for the whole class to enjoy. (Lisa)

Participants also mentioned that they were able to differentiate different ability levels:

I overthink, “Am I meeting all the multiple intelligences that are in this classroom? Am I meeting the needs of this child?” (Bridget)

I think it will make me more aware that there are differences and kids need different levels of teaching. (Pam)

I know what it’s like to be bored out of my mind in a class because they’re teaching something that’s so low to you. I think I’d try really hard to give them something challenging to think about. (Linda)

I realize more that the gifted kids need supplements too, that you shouldn’t just adapt for the kids that need a little boost, you should adapt for the kids that are beyond too. Because I think I was ignored a lot. (Maya)

In the previous quote, Maya alluded to an empathy with gifted students, a point also made by Jo:

I might look on the gifted kids with more, I don’t know, sympathy, I guess . . . just so they don’t feel so ostracized.

Along the same line of thinking, Patti and Kelly mentioned their intent to avoid putting gifted students under extra pressure:

I try not to treat them differently. You know differentiate for them, accommodate their needs, but I don’t want them to feel pressured. I don’t want them to feel singled out or different in my classroom. (Kelly)

Still other effects related to their own classroom persona:

I’m confident that if they ask me questions I’ll usually have some sort of answer. (Heather)

I think being intelligent would make you a better teacher. I think the kids kind of see that. I know which teachers I really respected and . . . you just kind of want to be a little sponge in their classroom. I mean it shines through, where lack of it also shines through I should say. (Charlotte)

Negative effects. However, not all of the effects of giftedness on the participants’ teaching were positive.

Six participants mentioned feeling frustrated when students do not understand some concepts:

I don’t understand why people don’t understand and I can say it 14 billion different ways and kids still just didn’t get it . . . But it’s a frustration level that I think I can work with. (Grace)

I think it has been hard to learn to find different ways to explain things when students struggle, and hard to pace the work. (Sharon)

Charlotte and Maya mentioned that they sometimes talk over their students’ heads:

I would end up using bigger words and things like that and they would look at me like, “What does that mean?” (Maya)

Intellectual challenge of teaching. As did those in the study by Grant et al. (2000), all but 2 of these participants believe that teaching is intellectually challenging for them:

I find teaching very challenging in areas I never had to worry much about, like time management, organization, public speaking, and conveying a concept clearly to others. Teaching is also intellectually challenging in many ways. This major has opened my eyes to so many new things and has me thinking about these topics on a deeper level. (Lisa)

I am always seeking new instructional methods, researching all facets of curriculum, and reading about new ways to make the children in my classroom successful. Every moment of every day I am learning something new. (Bridget)

Bridget’s comment is comparable to the desire for challenge, variety, and learning mentioned by participants in the study by Emmett and Minor (1993). The 2 participants who did not consider teaching as a whole to be intellectually challenging did find challenge in some aspects of the career:

I would say that the biggest intellectual challenge in teaching is problem solving. If something is not working, what can I do to fix the problem? As far as the regular ins and outs of the day, I would not say that it is all that big of an intellectual challenge. (Kelly)

I don’t think teaching at an elementary level challenges me intellectually; however, I do think that teaching is a challenge on a creative level. (Jen)

The preponderance of interactions between participants’ giftedness and their teaching, therefore, were positive, both for the participants and for their students. Carol succinctly summed up these interactions:
I feel that intelligence is necessary to be able to take a
difficult subject and make it simple, make it easy for
others to understand. . . . I believe that students can
assess the intelligence of their teacher, which in turn
determines the level of respect they give the teacher.

Discussion

Even though few of the participants had been
encouraged to pursue a career in teaching, they
remained steadfast in their choice, and the majority
would still choose teaching if they had to select a
career again. This demonstrates a personal locus of
control (Mendez, 2000) and the ability to “remain
certain, convinced about their abilities, [and] able
to maintain their career aspirations and content-
interests” (Reis & Callahan, 1996, p. 443), sometimes in
the face of active discouragement from friends and
family. This is consistent with Whatley’s (1998) find-
ings that gifted women find teaching to be a chal-
lenging and fulfilling career, but differs from Reis’s
(1995, 1998) findings. The participants in this study
did not choose teaching by default, nor did they feel
that teaching was a compromise. In some cases, the
barrage of discouragement they received did cause
the participants to question their choice, but they
maintained that they were happy in their careers.

Some of the fulfillment these participants experi-
enced was undoubtedly because of their perceptions
of being self-actualized in their careers. As Emmett
and Minor (1993) phrased it, they felt a sense of
accomplishment and contentment at pursuing a
career that was in alignment with their own values.
In relating the findings to the Eccles et al. (1983, as
cited in Eccles, 1994) model, these participants
placed more emphasis on the value that teaching held
for them as opposed to their expectations for success.
They maintained that they could have, and in fact
several had, succeeded at many different careers, but
chose teaching as the most meaningful to them. They
often mentioned the emotional rewards of teaching,
but they also recognized its intellectual benefits. Most
of the participants actively used their intellectual gifts
in their teaching. They mentioned numerous ways in
which their intellectual abilities were challenged or
used in the classroom, and most foresaw their teach-
ing careers continuing well into the future. As
Katherine put it, “I love going to work everyday!”

Their contentment was marred to some extent by
the pervasive attitude among their family and friends
and in the community that teaching is an easy job con-
ducted by those without the talent to do something
more worthwhile. These participants unanimously and
vociferously condemned this opinion, and some com-
mitted to being more vocal in educating others about
the importance and difficulty of the profession.

Limitations of this study include lack of a compar-
ison group and the small, racially homogeneous sam-
ple. In addition, the criteria for identifying the
participants relied on school district policies and var-
ied greatly. The definitions of “gifted” in place at that
time were also limited to “schoolhouse” giftedness.
Participants’ identification as gifted was based on
self-report, although the evidence presented was con-
vincing. There is also the possibility that some of the
participants’ recollections may have faded over time.
All participants were at a somewhat early stage in
their careers.

Given the limitations, recommendations based on
this research must be interpreted with caution.
However, participants were unanimous in their opinion
that careers in teaching must not be discouraged for
those who truly have an interest or calling to teach.
Indicators of such a calling would include seeking out
opportunities to interact with children and enjoying the
process of teaching in activities such as playing school.
When a young person has announced that he or she is
going to be a teacher, counselors, teachers, and parents
“need to project the expectation that gifted youth have
the right and responsibility to identify their own goals
and standards for success, and that they will be
approved of for doing so” (Emmett & Minor, 1993,
p. 363) rather than being discouraged. Nor should
gifted young people who choose to be teachers be
considered underachievers.

Concepts such as “achievement” and “realization of
potential” must be examined, clarified, and, if they
are to be congruent with women’s worldview, broad-
ed. For gifted women, and to an unknown degree
gifted men as well, “achievement” is not limited to
educational degrees and career status but includes
personal and interpersonal or relational achieve-
ments as well. (Hollinger & Fleming, 1992, p. 212)

A more productive discussion might arise from the
perspective of how intellectual gifts might be opti-
mized in a teaching career for both the teacher and
his or her students.

The participants in this study, as well as many in the
education field, believe that the teaching profession
ought to be more respected in our society. Until that
societal change occurs, it appears that a career in teach-
ing can still be fulfilling for gifted women and their tal-
ents can enrich the educational experiences of their
students in a variety of ways. In his study of gifted male elementary school teachers, Hébert (2000) postulated, “As boys and girls see more gifted male teachers in classrooms, they are more likely to perceive teaching as equally important to both sexes” (pp. 38-39). The same premise can reasonably be extrapolated to gifted female teachers, with the result that more gifted students may begin to see themselves as teachers. Although it is appropriate and critical to encourage gifted girls to aspire to high-level, prestigious professions, they should not necessarily be discouraged from pursuing a “traditionally female” career in education. As eloquently stated by Noble et al. (1999), “Whether gifted women exercise their talents to help others, to experience the joys of personal evolution, or to make meaning through self-expression is a choice that only they can make” (p. 147). Therefore, each girl should be informed of the full range of options open to her so that she may make the decision that is most consistent with her dreams and goals.

Appendix

Interview Protocol
Age: ____20-25 ____26-30 ____31-35 ____36-40 ____41-45 ____46-50 ____51-55 ____56-60 ____over 60
Area of teaching_______________________________________ No. yrs. teaching______
Is/Was teaching your first career? _____ If no, what other careers have you pursued?
Were there gifted, honors, or AP courses when you were going through school? _____
If yes, did you participate in any of those programs? ______ What did you think of them?
Was there a special selection process? _____ If yes, what was it?
Tell me about any academic honors or recognitions you have received.
Were you encouraged to choose teaching as a career?
Has anyone ever told you that you are wasting your talents teaching?
Did you consider other careers?
Why did you finally choose teaching?
If you had to do it over, would you choose teaching again?
Have you ever felt awkward or embarrassed about being intelligent?
Does being intelligent have any effect on the way you teach?
Are you challenged intellectually by teaching?
Does being intelligent have any effect on your classroom management?
Does being intelligent have any effect on how you feel about different intelligence levels of your own students?
Does teaching challenge you intellectually?
What do you see yourself doing in 10 years?

References


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