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Teacher and Student Perceptions of Pedagogical Practices on Gifted Student Motivation

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TEACHER AND STUDENT PERCEPTIONS OF PEDAGOGICAL PRACTICES
ON GIFTED STUDENT MOTIVATION

by

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the Honors in the Major Program in Communication
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ABSTRACT

This thesis explored teacher and student perceptions of classroom pedagogical practices as they may impact gifted children's motivation to learn. Because engaging gifted students can be uniquely challenging, teachers may need to tailor the teaching and learning experience to motivate them in ways that encourage them to succeed to their full potential. This exploratory study examined relationships among various pedagogical practices employed by a teacher and gifted student motivation. Ultimately, results of this study may lay a foundation for best practices for teaching gifted students.

Keywords: student motivation, gifted student pedagogy

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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

From the moment a child begins her formal education, her growth is shaped by the teacher-student relationship fostered in the classroom. This can be particularly challenging since different students have different ways of learning. Thus, it is ultimately up to the teacher to tailor the teaching and learning experience to best meet the educational needs of a variety of learners. One particularly challenging student population to engage is gifted students. To clarify, most grade-level school material and instructional methods are not challenging enough to motivate gifted students (Housand & Housand, 2012).

Gifted students need especially engaging pedagogical practices if they are to succeed to their full potential. Thus, this exploratory study examines the impact teachers have on gifted children. More specifically, this research examined the effects of the pedagogical practices on student motivation. Ultimately, results of this study may lay a foundation for best practices for teaching gifted students.

This thesis is organized into five chapters. This first chapter introduced the problem and rationale for the study. Chapter Two provides a review of related literature that serves to ground the research questions posed. Chapter Three describes the methods employed and Chapter Four offers results. Finally, Chapter Five summarizes the study with conclusions as they extend existing research, implications for teachers and those that train them, and suggestions for future research.

CHAPTER TWO: REVIEW OF LITERATURE

This section reviews the current literature pertaining to gifted student motivation and pedagogical practices. The first section focuses on the literature addressing student motivation and more specifically on gifted student motivation. The second section summarizes some relevant literature regarding teacher pedagogy. Ultimately, then, this section serves to provide a rationale for conducting this exploratory study.

Student motivation

Overcoming student apathy is challenging for teachers of any student population. For those teaching gifted students, motivating students to become interested must be followed up with effective strategies for keeping them engaged throughout the school-day (Housand & Housand, 2012). As they explain, “because gifted students are capable of achieving at high levels and growing at a pace that is often accelerated compared with their same-age peers, the challenges they encounter a need to escalate with a rather steep trajectory to maintain continual growth,” (p. 709). To succeed in teaching gifted students, then, teachers play a key role in fostering engagement among their students.

Little (2012) explored the relationship between gifted student motivation and school curriculum. The focus of her study was on understanding where gifted students’ motivation stems from. She discovered that a majority of their motivation stems from the teacher. To clarify, “The context and manner in which challenging tasks are presented matter in terms of promoting motivation and engagement for gifted learners” (p. 697). She concludes that motivating gifted students comes from a challenging curriculum and unique teacher pedagogy. In other words, no

matter how challenging a task may be, the teacher must present the material in an innovative and exciting way in order to grasp and maintain the gifted student's attention. Overcoming student boredom was a key finding in Little's research. She noted that:

Gifted students are bored with the regular curriculum because of their prior mastery of content and skills and/or their quick mastery of new material presented and that this boredom may result in such negative outcomes as psychological distress and inappropriate classroom behavior. (p. 698)

If gifted students bore more easily than traditional students because they master material more quickly, then an important part of the teacher's responsibility is to present the curriculum in the most engaging way possible. To clarify, Little (2012) notes:

All of these components should be designed to be engaging, interesting, and challenging to students to promote the potential intrinsic value of the tasks. It is not enough for teachers to perceive potential utility value or intrinsic value in the curriculum; another implication for classroom practice is the need to consider how potential task value is communicated to students. (p. 700)

Moreover, gifted students must consistently be challenged and feel that the work they are doing is meaningful. They see past 'busy work' and crave more valuable knowledge. In other words, "educators responsible for working with gifted learners—and with learners in general—must focus on ensuring learning opportunities that are appropriately challenging and meaningful for students, thereby promoting a sense of value and motivation in the learning environment" (p. 702). Little closed her article with a final quote regarding curriculum level of difficulty, coupled with teacher efforts, to increase motivation:

Curriculum that is challenging to students and that is implemented in a supportive learning context is more likely to promote motivation than curriculum that is too easy. Curriculum that is substantive and meaningful, particularly when teachers make specific efforts to help students find personal interest and meaning in it, will also promote motivation. (p. 703)

In sum, gifted students need a combination of meaningful, challenging material and attentive teacher pedagogy in order to promote the highest levels of motivation. The more gifted teachers emphasize the *importance* and *value* certain tasks and material have, the more motivation levels in their students should rise.

Gifted students are motivated intrinsically rather than extrinsically. Locke and Schattke (2018) describe intrinsic and extrinsic motivation as: “intrinsic conventionally means inside the entity and extrinsic means outside the entity or object” (p. 2). In their research regarding both types of motivation, Locke and Schattke offer two narrower definitions. They note that intrinsic motivation may be defined simply as “referring to the pleasure gained from an activity, divorced from any further elements” and extrinsic motivation “should be generally defined as doing something as a means to an end” (p. 1). The researchers discuss the association between intrinsic motivation and the possession of desires or aversions. Overall, intrinsic motivation can be linked to the unprovoked pleasure or enjoyment that students feel from accomplishing a certain action or task.

As Goldman, Goodboy, and Weber (2017) explain, “students’ attitudes, communication behaviors, and success are understood as products of their own intrinsic motivation to learn . . . When individuals are intrinsically motivated, they engage in activities that interest them, and, in

doing so, help them to learn, develop, and expand their capacities” (p. 168). By gaining a better understanding of students’ intrinsic motivation, educators can pinpoint how to maintain engagement in the most effective way. Goldman et al. (2017) highlighted the importance of garnering this intrinsic motivation of gifted students throughout their K-12 education to better prepare them for college. The researchers also examined the two different types of motivation scholars are interested in studying: state and trait motivation. They define state motivation as: “a situational construct that refers to the effort put toward a particular task or content area at a given point in time,” (p. 169). Trait motivation, on the other hand, is “a relatively stable construct that refers to the overall drive students have toward studying and learning in general,” (p. 169). Specifically, in the communication discipline, researchers tend to favor state over trait motivation “because of its strong associations with effective teaching behaviors such as nonverbal immediacy, clarity, affinity seeking, confirmation, and humor” (p.169).

Goldman et al.’s (2017) Self-Determination Theory (SDT) highlights the three basic psychological needs that intrinsic motivation depends on: autonomy, competence, and relatedness. These three terms were defined by Ryan and Deci (2002):

Relatedness refers to feelings connected to others, to caring for and being cared for by those others, to having a sense of belongingness both with other individuals and with one’s community. Competence refers to feeling effective in one’s ongoing interactions with the social environment; the need for competence leads people to seek challenges that are optimal for their capacities. Autonomy refers to being the perceived origin or source of one’s own behavior; autonomy concerns acting from interest. (p.7-8)

Thus, it is primarily up to the instructor and the learning environment that the instructor creates, to effectively promote the students' intrinsic motivation. Teachers play a significant role in helping gifted students fulfill their needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness; by being proactive in catering to these needs, teachers are more likely to harness and expand on the intrinsic motivation of their students.

Teachers who successfully foster motivation in their students do tend to employ certain practices. In their article regarding children's motivation for literacy, Turner and Paris (1995) noted six practices employed by teachers who foster motivation. These practices are:

(1) Provide authentic choices and purposes for literacy. (2) Allow students to modify tasks so the difficulty and interest levels are challenging. (3) Show students how they can control their learning. (4) Encourage collaboration. (5) Emphasize strategies and metacognition for constructing meaning. (6) Use the consequences of tasks to build responsibility, ownership, and self-regulation. (p. 672)

When these six techniques are enacted successfully, students and their teacher motivate each other to learn at higher levels. Not only that, requiring daily classroom tasks of students was the "most reliable indicator of motivation" (p. 664).

Mudrak and Zabrodska (2015) conducted a multiple case study that explored the ways young gifted adults make sense of their giftedness at younger ages and how those ways relate to motivation and agency. The results of the study revealed that "a strong sense of agency is critical to maintaining gifted-level achievement through adolescence" (p. 55). In other words, gifted students that feel a sense of agency challenge themselves more. This sense of agency becomes especially important as the gifted student transitions into adulthood.

Dai, Moon, and Feldhusen (1998) employed the social cognitive model to examine achievement motivation of gifted students and discovered that:

A social cognitive approach provides a more detailed account of motivational processes . . . [the approach] focuses on proximal cognitive and affective mediators of motivation such as self-efficacy, perceived intrinsic and extrinsic task values, and goals (forethought) rather than inferring some remote, intangible motive. (p. 56)

This source focuses on what each individual student brings to the table when considering his or her external/internal values, environmental factors, and different intellectual potential; the effects those elements have on the individual's learning style and internal motivation are significant. A multitude of factors contribute to a gifted student's overall achievement motivation level. Self-perception, or self-concept plays a large role in the motivation of gifted students (Dai et al., 1998). They argue: "compared to average ability students, gifted students have been found to perceive themselves as more competent, exhibit greater intellectual curiosity, academic interest, and challenge-seeking behavior, and have a higher preference for independent mastery" (p. 49). Obtaining a positive self-concept at a young age can help gifted children both realize their full potential early on and stay motivated through adolescence. The relationship between the teacher and student, coupled with effective pedagogical practices, should harness and accentuate the positive self-concepts that many gifted students bring to the table prior to instruction.

While copious external factors such as curriculum, teacher engagement, and teaching styles each play crucial roles in fostering student motivation, student self-perceptions still remain a strong force in determining student motivation levels. Thus, teachers could benefit from capitalizing on the young, positive self-concepts that gifted children tend to bring into the

classroom. It also seems beneficial for instructors to work on maintaining engagement and excitement in learning, both initially and continuously. Because a great deal of student motivation stems from the teacher, pedagogy should certainly be examined when analyzing gifted student motivation.

Pedagogical practices

Unlocking the effervescent academic potential of a young and gifted mind is an ambitious responsibility for any educator. Thinking outside the box and keeping gifted students engaged requires pedagogical practices that go beyond basic instructional methods. The effectiveness of learning outcome achievement stems in part from the efforts put forth by the teacher. In their research regarding the cognitive aspect of pedagogy, Hall and Smith (2006) noted, “teacher behavior is substantially influenced and determined by teachers’ thought processes . . . Teaching behaviors and actions are shaped by numerous cognitive decisions made by the teacher before, during, and after instruction” (p. 424). In fact, a teacher’s own personal experiences and thoughts have direct impacts on how he or she instructs students. The authors’ information on analyzing teacher behavior and actions in relation to the teachers’ thoughts and predispositions sheds some light regarding how different pedagogical practices are formed.

Kaplan and Hertzog (2016) stressed the direct connection present between teacher pedagogy and life-long student learning abilities, specifically in gifted populations, in their article on gifted pedagogy:

Life-long learning and success in college and beyond start in the early years. Creating, implementing, and evaluating curriculum that challenges young children are not new but are based on ideas from Martinson, Piaget, Dewey, Vygotsky. . . The role that pedagogy

plays in identifying and developing students' strengths is the perspective advocated for early childhood gifted education. (p. 135)

The aforementioned authors focused on the particular methods used by teachers in gifted classrooms. The idea that gifted children need more stimulation and engagement than other students at their grade-level means that it is crucial gifted teachers find alternative methods that garner engagement. Kaplan and Hertzog (2016) delineated three critical beliefs and values that shape the framework for early childhood gifted pedagogy:

(1) All children should have provisions for challenge. (2) Challenge provides recognition for teachers and students of their strengths, needs and their interests. (3) Teachers who create contexts to recognize strengths, needs, and interests respond to the variance in levels of readiness among learners. (p. 135)

When analyzing gifted children and how they learn, a great deal of emphasis is placed on the teacher's ability to be adaptive and creative in the delivery of instruction. Teachers of gifted children have a responsibility to not only educate, but to also engage constantly in order to provide the most beneficial learning experience. Gifted teachers must be cognizant of each student's abilities and needs in order to properly instill motivation and the excitement to learn in their students.

Moreover, Kaplan and Hertzog (2016) took into consideration the learning environment that gifted teachers create for their students when analyzing pedagogy for gifted education. In their article, they described effective learning environments for gifted children as having the following:

(1) A variety of resources such as raw materials, prompts for play, books, and photographs to stimulate independent inquiry. (2) Opportunities for children to solve problems within, between, and across disciplines alone, in small groups, or with the entire class. (3) Opportunities for students to use their current understandings to hypothesize about topics and to engage in role-playing their relationship to the topic. (4) A curriculum that allows for differentiated challenges to be conducted independently (independent study). (p. 139)

This source exemplifies how effective gifted pedagogical practices are only as beneficial as the environment they are being delivered in—gifted children need teachers who can design classrooms in a way that caters to the impressive and emerging abilities of said gifted students.

A popular topic in the education world today is the implementation of various technologies in the classroom. When discussing pedagogical practices in today's society, it is imperative to acknowledge the technological aspect of teacher pedagogy. The third grade teacher subject studied in this particular research project uses an interactive whiteboard (IWB) in her instructional methods; therefore, it seems beneficial to provide some research on the tool itself when delving into researching technological pedagogical practices. Lefebvre, Samson, Gareau, and Brouillette (2016) conducted a study involving elementary and high school teachers and their self-reported practices and outcomes revolving the IWB. They defined the interactive whiteboard as:

An electronic whiteboard on which the teacher can display content projected from a computer, tablet, or other source, and which can be used as a touch screen (using a pen or

finger) to move content around . . . The IWB is usually used for multimedia presentations that can include images, audio, video, and Internet links. (p. 3)

With the increased reliance on technology in this day and age, more and more teachers are turning towards interesting technologies to instruct their students. With the IWB at the focal point of the classroom being analyzed in this study, it is important to note how significant the tie is between teacher pedagogy and technology in this literature review. Housand and Housand (2012) echo the importance of incorporating technology in gifted classrooms to stimulate and better engage gifted students. In their research focusing on gifted students and technology, they mentioned, “Technology, specifically Internet communication technologies, provides unique opportunities for gifted students so that acceleration and enrichment options can be made available” (p. 709).

Lefebvre et al. (2016) also used the Technological Pedagogical Content Knowledge (TPACK) model in relation to the use of IWBs to further dissect teacher roles. The authors noted that “successful integration of technological tools (such as the IWB) requires an understanding of the complex interplay among technological, pedagogical, and content knowledge” (p. 4). These three types of knowledge—technological, pedagogical, and content—all must be tapped into by the teacher when attempting to implement new technologies into their modes of instruction. Technological knowledge revolves around the teacher’s own experience with the selected piece of technology; Pedagogical content knowledge concerns the teacher’s use of appropriate teaching styles catered to different subjects (Lefebvre et al., 2016). When blending these two components effectively, gifted students should receive information through a device in a manner

that demonstrates both the teacher's mastery of said device, and the teacher's careful, effective selection of a certain pedagogical practice.

Thus, this review of related literature gives rise to the following research questions:

RQ1: What are elementary school teachers' perceptions of pedagogical best practices for motivating gifted students to engage actively in the classroom?

RQ2: To what degree do gifted elementary school students perceive certain pedagogical practices to motivate them to engage actively in the classroom?

CHAPTER THREE: METHODS

In order to analyze teacher and student perceptions of pedagogical practices and student motivation, one interview with the selected teacher and one focus group with that teacher's students were held. The exploratory study's data consist of all responses recorded during both the teacher interview and the student focus group. Recorded responses were individually coded and emerging themes were analyzed via thematic analysis.

Participants

This study focused on students in one gifted third grade class and its teacher. The students in the class selected for this study spend about four and a half hours out of each eight-hour school day with their teacher one-on-one (the remaining hours are broken up into "Specials", recess, lunch, and computer lab time). Once IRB approval was attained, third graders from the gifted class were invited to participate in the study. Those that agreed to participate and whose parents provided consent for participation were included in the study. In total, one teacher and 18 students provided data examined for this research project.

Procedures

Once IRB approval was attained, the gifted third-grade students and their parents received consent forms requesting their willingness to participate in the study. Once the appropriate consent materials were received, data collection began.

Both the interview with the teacher and the focus group with the students took place at Cranberry Elementary School in North Port, Florida. The interview process consisted of a thirty-minute, one-on-one interview with the gifted third-grade teacher regarding her perception of best

pedagogical practices that she employs in the classroom. One forty-minute focus group was conducted with the 18 third-grade student participants. The focus group consisted of asking a series of questions concerning the student perception of best pedagogical practices. A summary report of anonymous focus group responses in aggregate form was provided to the teacher at the conclusion of the research project.

Instruments

This study examined perceptions of student motivation and pedagogies through a focus group held with the gifted third-grade students and an interview with the teacher. The interview guide and focus group questions are provided in Appendix B and Appendix C.

Data Analysis

A qualitative thematic analysis was conducted to discover emergent themes in the teacher responses to interview questions and the student responses to focus group questions. The interviewer and focus group facilitator followed a pre-established protocol based on an extant literature review, which had been approved by the UCF Internal Review Board (IRB). The thematic analysis of responses consisted of reading and re-reading the transcriptions and looking for themes related to the research questions based on pedagogical practices and motivation (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). In other words, the data was coded based on “conceptual categories provided by our disciplinary knowledge and theory” (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011, p. 95). Researchers established themes by looking for patterns among the responses (Boyatzis, 1998). Content in each category was grouped into subcategories based on common themes. Any disagreements regarding themes were resolved through discussion.

CHAPTER FOUR: RESULTS

This chapter summarizes the thematic analysis results for each of the research questions.

The research questions include: (a) What are elementary school teachers' perceptions of pedagogical best practices for motivating gifted students to engage actively in the classroom? and (b) To what degree do gifted elementary school students perceive certain pedagogical practices to motivate them to engage actively in the classroom?

Research Question 1: Teacher perceptions

To answer the question about teacher perceptions of pedagogical best practices for student motivation, responses were recorded from a one-on-one interview with the gifted third grade teacher. Questions pertained to the teacher's educational background, pedagogy, and student motivation. By looking at how teachers communicate about their own teaching philosophy, one can begin to understand the meaning certain teachers assign to various pedagogical practices. The interview consisted of ten open-ended questions.

The first portion of the interview questions focused on the teacher's educational background. Question one asked "*What made you want to be a teacher?*" The teacher traced her passion for teaching back to when she was younger and would play "school" with the little kids during family gatherings. The teacher noted how she originally went into college seeking a degree in child psychology. The second question regarding the teacher's educational background posed the question "*Where did you obtain your education?*" The third-grade teacher started college at Saint Michael's College in Vermont with a major in psychology. Ultimately, when she was two years into her program, the teacher transferred to Salem State College in Massachusetts, which happened to be a teaching college. It was at Salem State that the teacher changed her

major to Elementary Education. She earned her degree in 1989. In 2009, the teacher obtained her Master's degree in Gifted Education while raising three children of her own. The final question regarding the teacher's education background asked "*Why did you choose to teach gifted education?*" The teacher responded by expressing that gifted education is her passion. After teaching students of all kinds for twenty years, she realized she connected more with gifted children. She expressed that she enjoys the challenge of trying to meet their needs. The teacher went on to note that she "had three very bright children of her own who did not seem to have many teachers that had high expectations in pushing them to their limits." She also mentioned that she "noticed a trend with high-stakes testing that all state resources were being channeled into and focused on the lowest 25% of the population, and other kids were expected to learn on auto-pilot." She also "considers it a challenge to show the same amount of growth for all learners, especially children who come in above grade-level."

The second portion of the interview focused specifically on teacher pedagogy. The first question in this section asked, "*What are some examples of the pedagogy you employ?*" The teacher responded by first providing examples of certain social programs she uses which include: growth mindset (i.e. teaching students to constantly learn through life and work towards growth mindsets rather than fixed), visible learning (i.e. displaying learning intentions and success criteria around the room), accountable talk (i.e. fostering academic-focused discussions consisting of clear communication and direct language), civility squad (i.e. focusing on teaching character traits and specifically, kindness), and positive behavior support (i.e. following the county-wide initiative that teaches kids to be respectful, responsible, and ready to learn). The teacher also mentioned that she prefers to include lots of critical thinking games, such as Tangy

Tuesday math exercise sheets, as well as lots of chess games both between the teacher and students and between the students themselves. Two examples of critical thinking games are academic versions of Password and Headbands, both modified to focus on vocabulary-related content.

Additionally, the teacher noted that a main part of her teaching philosophy is “teaching the whole child.” She elaborated that this involves “forming relationships with every child, which includes high expectations for both learning and behavior.” The second question asked “*What do you believe are the best pedagogical practices in general?*” The teacher responded to this question by expressing her belief in student-led learning (e.g., student-selected topics, “Independent Research,” hands-on approaches, problem-based learning, STEM challenges, debates). She explained that she believes she is more of a “process teacher rather than a product teacher.” A follow-up question was posed at this point in the interview: “*What do you believe are the best practices for gifted students?*” The teacher responded by saying how she really “works on incorporating academic vocabulary into all conversations. [She] encourages [the students] to find the best word to explain something and we collect words on the board that they find in their own reading.” She focuses on teaching the students to identify context clues and share them with the rest of the class. The teacher also uses a read-aloud book on an eighth-grade reading level and she and the class constantly stop to point out figurative language (e.g., metaphors, hyperbole, simile). Another thing the teacher stressed about her teaching style was the fact that she tries to teach her students “all year to make connections across subject areas throughout the year—showing them that everything we learn is interconnected.” The final question posed in this section of the interview was: “*When teaching gifted students, do you believe there are different*

factors or needs to consider when adjusting your pedagogy?” The teacher responded saying “Yes. Gifted students have overexcitabilities, are perfectionistic, and sometimes have parents who are not aware of the special needs gifted students require.” The teacher also shed light on a common misconception regarding gifted students and their ability to easily excel in every area without trying. She exclaimed, “Gifted students can be very bright in one area, but lack the skills in other areas, which leads them to believe they can’t do something.” Finally, the teacher mentioned how many gifted students “have a fixed mindset and are extremely hard on themselves” and how they can “be very competitive but are complete sponges for learning.”

The final portion of the interview focused on student motivation. The first question asked “*Where do you believe student motivation comes from?*” The teacher responded by saying that “at this age, it is not really intrinsic for all kids” and that she really tries to “teach effective effort which will ultimately lead to intrinsic motivation.” The teacher asserted that she “is trying to get them to realize that success comes from hard work.” The teacher stressed the importance of each child’s hard work, but also noted that some motivation does come from what students experience at home. The second question of this section asked: “*How do you think teacher pedagogy relates to student motivation?*” The teacher responded by stressing that the key to student motivation is feedback. She asserted, “the more high-quality, specific feedback a student gets, the more they will be motivated to do well in the future and meet expectations.” The teacher attributed successful engagement of gifted students to teacher clarity. More specifically, she noted: “teacher clarity is very important because when you are very clear on instructions, they can almost always meet expectations and feel motivated to do so.” Finally, the teacher ended her response to this question by stating “we try to instill a sense of urgency about all of their work at

our school.” The final question asked of the teacher was: “*What do you do each day to try to foster motivation in your students? Could you provide some examples?*” The teacher noted how she specifically keeps the students on track: “One thing I do is create a bulleted list of key assignments that need to be done by the end of the week. This way the kids always know what to do next and gives them a sense of empowerment of not just doing one thing and sitting, waiting for the next direction.” The teacher went on to stress the fact that she uses a lot of “peer, self, and teacher rubrics” so that students “know exactly what is expected of them (no secrets teaching).” The importance of choice was also stressed when the teacher noted how she “almost always provides choice of activities such as the tic-tac-toe choice board for ELA preparation or my math menu of activities.” The idea of fostering a certain type of environment in the classroom for gifted students was also mentioned when the teacher explained how she tries to have “very clear learning intentions and success criteria posted around the room so [the students] always know what good work looks like.”

In sum,, several themes arose from the interview regarding the teacher’s overall teaching philosophy. Moreover, these themes--teacher clarity, teacher immediacy, teaching the whole child, and critical thinking—are all key factors this teacher employs to foster higher levels of engagement among her students.

Research Question 2: Student perceptions

To answer the question about student perceptions of pedagogical practices and motivation, student responses from all focus group questions were coded. The focus group produced, in total, 126 student responses. By looking at how students communicate about their teacher and school, one can begin to understand what meaning students assign to certain teaching

strategies and potential relations between them and student motivation. The focus group consisted of seven open-ended questions regarding the students' perceptions of the teacher, her style of teaching, school and classwork, and thoughts about college.

The first focus group question, *How do you feel when your teacher assigns an assignment?*, produced the following three emergent themes:

1. Positive feelings about the assignment
2. Indifference about the assignment
3. Negative feelings about the assignment

Of the 18 total responses, 13 of the students (72%) reported having positive feelings associated with the introduction of a new task or assignment in class. A total of four students (22%) reported having mixed feelings about assignments depending on the subject. For example, a few students reported positive feelings about some subjects while reporting negative feelings about others. In total, one student (6%) reported having negative feelings about the introduction of any new assignment in class.

For question two, *What is your favorite thing about your teacher?*, the following three themes emerged:

1. She provides challenging work
2. She fosters a welcoming atmosphere in the classroom
3. She uses reward systems

Of the total 18 responses recorded, eight of the students (44%) reported their favorite teacher characteristic was that she is challenging. A total of three students (17%) favored the

welcoming atmosphere their teacher provided. Finally, seven of the students (39%) gave answers that highlighted the various reward systems used in the classroom.

In question three, *What is your least favorite thing about your teacher?*, the following three themes emerged:

1. Punishment
2. No least favorite thing
3. Challenging

Of the total 18 responses recorded, two responses (11%) were punishment-related. A majority of the students, 13 (72%), said they did not have a least favorite thing about their teacher. Finally, three of the students (17%) noted the fact that their teacher was challenging as their least favorite characteristic. Some examples of punishment provided by the students included time deduction from recess or free time, negative behavior reports (that are sent home to the parent or guardian), and relocation to the “desk of opportunity” where students in this class who misbehave are to reflect on what they did wrong.

In question four, *What is school like for you?*, the following three categories emerged:

1. Enjoys school because it is challenging
2. Does not enjoy school because of waking up early
3. Enjoys school because of ability to see former teachers
4. Enjoys school because of current teacher

Of the total 18 student responses, eight students (44%) noted that they enjoyed school because it is challenging. A total of six students (33%) reported that they did not enjoy school because of the lack of sleep (i.e., having to wake up early) that comes along with it. Finally, four

students (22%) mentioned that they enjoyed school because of their teachers (both former and current).

Question five, *What is the most boring part of school?*, produced the following four themes:

1. Lack of control over one's activities
2. Challenging material
3. Not enough sleep
4. Not enough breaks
5. No boring parts at all

Of the total 18 student responses, six students (33%) attributed the most boring part of school to their lack of control over things like their time, sleep, and activities. A total of three students (17%) said the most boring part of school was the challenging material. Also, five of the students (28%) attributed their lack of sleep ('no naps', 'waking up too early', etc.) to the most boring part of school. Additionally, two students (11%) said the most boring part of school was the fact that they don't get enough breaks throughout the day. Finally, two students (11%) reported that there were no boring parts of school.

In question six, *What does your teacher do that helps you succeed/learn?*, the following five themes emerged:

1. She is encouraging
2. She gives us hints when we are stuck
3. She defines tasks/instructions clearly
4. She provides multiple explanations or definitions

5. She always comes to help when we raise our hands

Of the total 18 student responses, two students (11%) said that their teacher's encouragement was most helpful. One student (6%) mentioned how they appreciate when their teacher gives them hints when they're stuck. In addition, four students (22%) said they found their teacher's clarity (clearly defining tasks) the most helpful. Additionally, four students (22%) said that their teacher helped them by providing multiple explanations and definitions for words and tasks. A total of five students (28%) reported that their teacher helped them by demonstrating teacher immediacy behaviors (i.e. always rushing over to help when they raise their hands and get stuck). Finally, two students (11%) did not offer a response to this question.

In question seven, *What do you think of college?*, the following three themes emerged:

1. Anxiety
2. Excitement
3. Don't think about it

Of the total 18 student responses, eight students (44%) mentioned that they had some feelings of fear or anxiety when asked about college. A total of seven students (39%) reported that they were excited about or looking forward to college. Finally, three students (17%) said that they did not think about college at all.

CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSION

This exploratory study sought to identify the impact that teacher pedagogy has on gifted student motivation. The study focused on analyzing the teacher and student perceptions of motivation related to teacher pedagogy. Several conclusions and implications arose from the analysis. This section closes with a discussion on limitations and future research.

Conclusions

From the data gathered in the teacher interview, a variety of pedagogical styles that the teacher employs each day were discussed. The teacher described her own teaching philosophy in detail and why she believes her strategies successfully motivate gifted children. The fact that this teacher focuses on “teaching to the whole child” supports previous research about tailoring classroom practices in ways that develop the student academically, behaviorally, and psychologically (Hall & Smith, 2006; Kaplan & Hertzog, 2016). This philosophy requires the teacher to exude a multitude of teacher immediacy behaviors, both verbal and non-verbal, all while keeping the students engaged and challenged academically. The teacher also uses critical thinking games to enhance student vocabulary while offering an exciting and competitive academic option, which supports existing research by Howard and Crotty (2017) that games can be an effective tool for doing so. The teacher also mentioned how important it is to offer choice in assignments and in being very clear when explaining them. These findings confirm what say regarding teacher clarity and flexibility as motivational strategies, particularly for gifted students (Titsworth et al., 2015; Kaplan & Hertzog, 2016). Finally, the teacher offered that fostering a warm and welcoming environment and constantly challenging gifted students serve to both encourage and motivate them to strive to achieve to their highest potential. As such, her

strategies confirm what Kotaman et al. (2016) say about the role of immediacy as a best practice, as well as the need to challenge gifted students to break through potential apathy barriers caused by boredom (Kaplan & Hertzog, 2016).

Consistent with the teacher responses and previous research, results from the student focus group indicate that gifted students enjoy when their teachers demonstrate teacher clarity (Titsworth et al., 2015). Multiple student responses indicated that they enjoy when their teacher provides clear instructions and when their teacher provides multiple definitions of certain words and phrases. Students participating in this study also thrive on positive encouragement from their teachers. Many students stated that the favorite thing about their teacher is her encouragement, thus supporting what Alcott (2017) says about the role of teacher encouragement in motivating students. Students also reported that teacher immediacy behaviors (e.g., exuding kindness and warmth, remaining consistently available to students, always taking the time to individually explain difficult concepts, etc.) motivated them to try harder, which parallels the teacher's philosophy and pedagogical practices as well as previous research (Menzel & Carrell, 1999; Rocca, 2008). In sum, strategies employed by the teacher and perceived by the students to encourage motivation include clarity, variety, and immediacy. Thus, the conclusions of this study contribute to existing research by revealing that teachers can intentionally employ strategies to foster them and that students do perceive the inclusion of them as positively influencing motivation.

Implications

Moving forward, this study provides a foundation for what future teachers and administrators may do to motivate gifted students. To encourage all teachers of gifted students to

employ similar strategies, teacher training programs could be provided that focus specifically on each of these areas. In doing so, new teachers would come to the classroom prepared to motivate gifted students effectively. Moreover, administrators could offer inservice teacher training workshops to refresh teachers about existing strategies for doing so, as well as future strategies that may arise with affordances from new technologies as they develop. Gifted students need teachers who are attentive, encouraging, clear, and challenging to succeed. Teacher training programs—both preservice and inservice—can help provide and develop their skills for doing so.

Limitations and Future Research

This exploratory study does have a few limitations. For instance, this particular study only analyzed one teacher and one class of students from one elementary school. The population of total participants was fairly small with only 18 students and one teacher. Future researchers would benefit from studying multiple teachers of gifted students in multiple classrooms. They would also benefit from using multiple schools in future studies to guarantee better representation of the population. The demographics of the students used in this study were also fairly similar which can be considered a limitation. Future studies would benefit from using a more diverse population in their research. Finally, this study was strictly based off of teacher and student perceptions. Thus, future researchers could benefit from including experimental studies that measure student motivation rather than basing results off of perceptions.

This study contributes to existing research by reinforcing the value of implementing certain teaching strategies as a means by which to motivate gifted students. Much more, however, can and should be done to further both what we know about motivating gifted students

and then actually doing so in our classrooms. It is imperative that we address the needs of all students—including our “best and brightest” as we help prepare them to become all they can be as they grow into leaders that will ultimately play key roles in making the world a better place.

APPENDIX A: TABLE ONE

Table 1: Focus Group Question Results

Question	Emerging themes	Frequency (%)
1. How do you feel when your teacher assigns a new task/assignment?	Positive feelings	72
	Mixed feelings	22
	Negative feelings	6
2. What is your favorite thing about your teacher?	Challenging	44
	Reward system	39
	Welcoming atmosphere	17
3. What is your least favorite thing about your teacher?	Nothing	72
	Challenging	17
	Punishment	11
4. What is school like for you?	Enjoy school for the challenge	44
	Does not enjoy because of waking up early	33
	Enjoys school for the teachers	22
5. What is the most boring part of school?	Control	33
	Not enough sleep	28
	Challenging material	17
	Not enough breaks	11
	Nothing	11
6. What does your teacher do that helps you succeed/learn?	Teacher immediacy	28
	Defining tasks clearly	22
	Multiple explanations/definitions	22
	Pass	11
	Encouragement	11
	Giving hints	6
7. What do you think of college?	Anxiety	44
	Excitement	39
	Don't think about it	17

APPENDIX B: INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Interview Question Sheet

Subject: Gifted third-grade teacher

Estimated time: 30-60 minutes

- I. Educational Background
 - a. What made you want to be a teacher?
 - b. Where did you obtain your education?
 - c. Why did you choose to teach gifted education?
- II. Pedagogy
 - a. What are some examples of the pedagogy you employ?
 - b. What do you believe are the best pedagogical practices in general?
 - c. When teaching gifted students, do you believe there are different factors or needs to consider when adjusting your pedagogy?
- III. Motivation
 - a. Where do you believe student motivation comes from?
 - b. How do you think teacher pedagogy relates to student motivation?
 - c. What do you do each day to try and foster motivation in your students? Could you provide some examples?

APPENDIX C: FOCUS GROUP QUESTIONS

Focus Group Question Sheet

Subjects: Gifted third-grade students (18)

Estimated time: 30-60 minutes

Question count: 7

Opening script to be read to participating students: “Thank you all for participating in this research project. This focus group session will take approximately thirty to sixty minutes to complete. I would like to remind each of you that your answers will be kept anonymous. Your teacher will have no way of knowing who said what today. If you do not want to answer one of the questions in the focus group session, you may feel free to skip. If at any point you wish to leave the discussion, you may, and we will arrange another activity during the focus group session time. Please be respectful of others and agree to act in the following manner throughout the focus group: do not use names of students including your own, speak one at a time, and speak your truth! Let’s begin.”

Questions about teacher’s pedagogy:

1. How do you feel when your teacher assigns a new task/assignment?
2. What is your favorite thing about your teacher?
3. What is your feast favorite thing about your teacher?

Questions regarding intrinsic motivation:

4. What is school like for you?
5. What is the most boring part of school?
6. What does your teacher do that helps you succeed/learn?

Possible question to think futuristically:

7. How do you feel about college?

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