

## **The Relationship between Teacher's Personality Traits and Exceptional Students' Learning**

**Zahra Bayani**

Department of ELT, Aliabad Katoul Branch, Islamic Azad University, Aliabad Katoul, Iran

Email: [heavengirl\\_azaseman@yahoo.com](mailto:heavengirl_azaseman@yahoo.com)

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### **ABSTRACT**

The study of teacher's personality and the extent of student learning will always have to turn to one another for help and the one will not invalidate the other. Education plays main role in all aspects of life. By providing the quality education we can produce quality products. The decisions and actions of a teacher affect the learning process. The major purpose of present study is to investigate the effects of teacher's personality traits on the learning of the exceptional students, to examine the learning achievement of the exceptional students as a result of teacher's behavior, to clarify the relationship between teacher's personality and input learning and finally to recommend strategies for the improvement of teacher's personality in exceptional schools. The theoretical framework of this study is based on Brophy's Key Behaviors Contribution to Effective Teaching, Ryans and Johnson Personality Traits.

**KEY WORDS:** Effective Teaching, Exceptional Students, Personality Trait, Successful Teacher

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### **INTRODUCTION**

Education is now universally recognized to be prime key of moral, cultural, political and socio-economic development of a nation. The nations, which have been taken major initiatives, made revolutionary advances and performed miracles in the last two decades. No doubt, this great achievement is based on their effective educational system (Ahmad, 2001). It is stated "educational system of any country can provide the guarantee of success and prosperity for their nations". (Saeed, 2001). No system of education is better than his personnel and no system of education above the standard of its teacher's personality. It means, the quality of any system depends upon the standard of its personnel.

Smith (1977) has claimed that teacher's personality in the attitudinal sense is significant factor in teacher behavior and it has great impact on student's achievement. The effective teacher is capable of creating a desire to learn. He must be able to sense the interests of students, recognize their needs, and make learning purposeful not only in relation to course objectives but in the minds of his students.

For many years, parents and teachers have been perplexed about youngsters who have dramatic learning strengths in some areas and equally dramatic learning weaknesses in others. These students appear to defy accurate labeling: Are they exceptional or learning disabled? Finally, the debate has stopped, and educators are now recognizing these students as "twice-exceptional." Rather than trying to use evidence from their weak learning areas to prove they are not "truly gifted," savvy teachers are now learning how to allow these students to experience the same opportunities available for gifted students when they are learning in their strength areas.

Some educators emphasize the idea that schools should be child-centered, but probably none will question the statement that the success of our educational endeavors depends, to a very great extent, on the teachers who are responsible for implementing the educational programs. To be a teacher is to be a member of a special profession. A teacher has to display exceptional empathy, persistence, diligence, sincerity, research orientation, honesty and flexibility as a person. Teachers are the models in the classroom whose attitudes are imitated by the students consciously or unconsciously.

Teachers must do their role so obviously in the classroom as if there is no deep difference between the role of the teachers and what practice they do in the classroom. People presume that a knowledgeable teacher who teaches a particular subject will be confident but this is not necessarily the case. In fact, knowledge of a particular subject does not correspond to increased confidence in one's ability to teach the subject in the classroom (Tosun, 2000).

## RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1. Is there any significant relationship between teacher's personality traits and the instructions used by them for exceptional students?
2. Does the similarity between teacher and student's personality traits affect learning?

## REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

Every day, teachers around the world are entrusted with the task of fostering the academic and intellectual development of the students they teach. However, each teacher is a unique individual, with his or her own personality, experiences, and way of perceiving the world. And each student is equally unique. It has been argued that some teachers might be better suited for teaching exceptional students than other teachers. For example, Mandrell and Fiscus (1981) argued that not all teachers should be assigned to teach the exceptional. However, there remain unanswered questions regarding the personality and cognitive styles of effective teachers and relations between the personality and cognitive styles of teachers whom the exceptional students they teach.

In the domain of personality traits and teaching, several methodologists (Richards and Rodgers, 1986; Tudor, 1993; Harmer, 2001) have suggested many potential roles for a teacher. Researchers have been trying to identify the personality characteristics associated with superior teachers, e.g. those who have won many distinguished awards etc. Ryans (1960) identified the following characteristics among superior teachers on the basis of his research:

- They frequently mention liking for children and interest in their development as reasons for teaching.
- They express admiration of such qualities as friendliness, permissiveness, definiteness and fairness in teachers.
- They dislike in teachers such qualities as arrogance, intolerance, sarcasm, and partiality.
- They typically appear to be accepting and generous in their appraisals of other persons and to see the good points of a person rather than the bad.
- They express satisfaction with teaching (and also with teacher salaries) and intend to continue teaching indefinitely.
- They frequently engaged in teaching activity as a child (for example, taking charge of the class in the absence of the teacher).

The other side of this research is personality traits. Psychologists define personality as individual differences in the way people tend to think, feel and behave. There are many ways to measure personality, but psychologists have mostly given up on trying dividing humanity neatly into types. Instead, they focus on personality traits. The most widely accepted of these traits are the Big Five: Openness, Conscientiousness, Extraversion, Agreeableness, Neuroticism.

Our personality traits in this study are combinations of the four dimensions form 16 possible types that are: extraversion-introversion, sensing-intuition, thinking-feeling, and judging-perceiving. These types are not fixed or static personality traits; rather, they represent preferences. Depending upon time, development, and situation, one can shift his or her relative position on the four bipolar dimensions of the MBTI, although in general our preferences remain fairly stable.

The extraversion-introversion (E-I) dimension refers to preferred modes of relating to the external world. Extraverts (E) tend to be action-oriented, sociable, sometimes impulsive individuals who are more interested in the outer world of people and experiences; introverts (I) tend to be contemplative, detached individuals who are more interested in the inner world of thoughts and ideas. The sensing-intuition (S-N) dimension refers to how individuals prefer to take in and process information. Sensing (S) refers to a preference for working with known facts, and individuals with this preference tend to be practical realists; intuition (N) refers to a preference for the abstract and symbolic, a predisposition for seeking relationships and possibilities. On the thinking-feeling (T-F) dimension, thinking (T) types prefer a logical, impersonal, analytical style of decision making, while feeling (F) types prefer a subjective, interpersonal style of decision making, considering values, aesthetics, and personal implications. Finally, the judging-perceiving (J-P) dimension refers to preferences for either a decisive, planned, orderly, systematic approach (judging; J) or a more flexible, adaptable, and spontaneous style (perceiving; P).

Teacher's personality affects his/her behavior in class according to his/her perception of students as low achievers or as high achievers. It is often difficult for teachers to understand that students with learning difficulties might also be exceptional in some areas of learning. However, if we remember that the essential definition of exceptional is exactly that, we can see such learners from a different perspective. Allow these students to experience the same compacting and differentiation opportunities available to other students. Offer pretests to allow them to document previous mastery of upcoming content. so, in relevance, Brophy (1991) and Renzulli (1997), identify Compacting as a common condition in this field. *Compacting* is the process of

allowing highly capable students to demonstrate their previous mastery of some of the required curriculum. Compacting also occurs when students are allowed to demonstrate that they need less time than their peers to learn new material. When the evidence of the need for compacting is present, differentiation follows. Thus, when students demonstrate that the general curriculum or pacing does not provide an appropriate challenge, they can gain access to more challenging topics or activities. Exceptional students deserve these opportunities, not simply because they are exceptional but because all students are entitled to experience the promises of the school's mission statement. If it promises that students are supposed to be able to achieve learning to the highest levels of their potential, exceptional students must be allowed access to activities that are personally challenging. If being exceptional implies a learning ability that exceeds expectations for same-age peers, it is natural to understand the need for differentiated curriculum.

In one of the most rigorous studies in this area, Bishop (1968) studied on personality traits of teachers of exceptional students. Bishop concluded that the effective teacher group was characterized by superior intelligence, greater literary and cultural interests, and higher achievement needs. Further, teachers in the effective group more often reported that they entered the teaching profession for their own intellectual growth. In the classroom, these teachers were more stimulating and imaginative, and they tended to be more student-centered in their teaching style. At the same time, these teachers were also more systematic and orderly. The effective teachers were well versed in and enthusiastic about their subject matter, and they defined their own success as a teacher by how well they motivated their students. These teachers also indicated a preference for teaching exceptional students.

### METHOD

As this study try to show, the characteristics of the effective teachers documented by Bishop were similar to those typically ascribed to exceptional students. These characteristics included creativity, tolerance for ambiguity, and interest in literature and cultural matters. Other researchers have also suggested that successful teachers of exceptional students share personality and cognitive orientations with the students they teach. For example, Renzulli (1997) argued that we should “devote considerable effort to analyzing the preferred learning styles of students and look for opportunities to place students with teachers who have compatible styles” (p. 58). The match between the personality and cognitive styles of exceptional students and teachers has not been studied empirically. However, there is some indication that the personality and cognitive styles of these students differ from those of more average-achieving students.

### PROCEDURE

Sixty-three teachers from The Center of Exceptional Youth (CEY) of Gorgan-Iran were identified as exemplary participated in this study from among those who had taught at CEY for 2 or more years. Teachers were selected as “exemplary” based on observations and performance ratings from CEY administrators and evaluations of teachers completed by students (objective ratings of teacher effectiveness as judged along a number of dimensions, including knowledge of content, preparedness, concern for individual learning, and openness to differing opinions). From a total pool of 400 teachers, 85 individuals were identified as exemplary and invited to participate in this research. In response to this invitation, 65 teachers (74%) agreed to participate. Teachers were then asked to complete a background questionnaire and the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI). Participating teachers ranged in age from 20 to 73, with a mean age of 35.4 ( $SD = 12.0$ ). Approximately 63% of the teachers were male.

In addition to the teacher sample, a sample of 1,247 students who attended CEY also participated in this study. These students were independently selected from CEY classes; they were not specifically selected from classes taught by the teachers in the study, although some may very well have been students of the participating teachers. By design, no attempt was made to link teachers and students in the study. Participating students ranged in age from 13 to 16 years of age. The sample consisted of 559 (45%) female and 688 (55%) male students.

### MEASURES

Participating teachers were given a background questionnaire designed to gather basic demographic information (e.g., gender, age), as well as professional training and experiences. Questions also addressed their principal occupations and experience working with exceptional students. Teachers and students were independently given Form G of the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (Myers & McCaulley, 1985). Students took the MBTI in small group settings with a test administrator, while teachers completed the MBTI individually. The MBTI is a forced choice, self-report measure of preferences on four bipolar dimensions that are typically scored dichotomously: extraversion-introversion, sensing-intuition, thinking-feeling, and judging-perceiving.

Several methods of scoring the MBTI for learning and teaching styles, in addition to the usual preference scores for the four personality dimensions and the frequency distributions for the 16 MBTI types, have been developed. One of the most popular models was developed by Golay (1982) and is based on the SJ (Structured

Realist), SP (Action-Oriented Realist), NF (Idealistic Humanist), and NT (Rational Theorist) dimension pairs discussed by Kiersey and Bates (1984). A second popular model, developed by Kalsbeek (1989), uses the IN (Abstract- Reflective), EN (Abstract-Active), IS (Concrete-Reflective), and ES (Concrete-Active) dimension pairs. Both of these scoring systems were used in this study, in addition to the typical scoring procedure utilizing frequency distributions for each dimension and for each of the 16 types to explore the data more fully. Table 2 contains the frequency distribution of MBTI types for the exemplary CEY teachers ( $N = 63$ ) and for the CEY summer program participants ( $N = 1,247$ ). The percent of individuals falling into each MBTI category is illustrated in Table 3 for these three groups: CEY exemplary teachers, the normative sample of middle school teachers, and CEY exceptional students.

**Table 1.** *Type Distribution of CEY Exemplary Teachers, a Normative Sample of Middle School Teachers, and CEY Students*

MBTI Type*	CEY Teachers ( $N = 63$ )	Norm MS Teachers ( $N = 1,128$ )	CEY Students ( $N = 1,247$ )
ISTJ	5 (7.9%)	126 (11.2%)	112 (9.0%)
ISFJ	0 (0.0%)	138 (12.2%)	27 (2.2%)
INFJ	1 (1.6%)	56 (5.0%)	57 (4.6%)
INTJ	14 (22.2%)	51 (4.5%)	116 (9.3%)
ISTP	2 (3.2%)	26 (2.3%)	46 (3.7%)
ISFP	0 (0.0%)	36 (3.2%)	17 (1.4%)
INFP	3 (4.8%)	67 (5.9%)	127 (10.2%)
INTP	5 (7.9%)	27 (2.4%)	185 (14.8%)
ESTP	1 (1.6%)	20 (1.8%)	40 (3.2%)
ESFP	0 (0.0%)	43 (3.8%)	20 (1.6%)
ENFP	6 (9.5%)	124 (11.0%)	170 (13.6%)
ENTP	5 (7.9%)	44 (3.9%)	147 (11.8%)
ESTJ	2 (3.2%)	103 (9.1%)	43 (3.4%)
ESFJ	1 (1.6%)	130 (11.5%)	24 (1.9%)
ENFJ	8 (12.7%)	88 (7.8%)	35 (2.8%)
ENTJ	10 (15.9%)	49 (4.3%)	81 (6.5%)

Note. \* The MBTI is a measure of preferences on four bipolar dimensions that are typically scored dichotomously: extraversion (E) vs. introversion (I), sensing (S) vs. intuition (N), thinking (T) vs. feeling (F), and judging (J) vs. perceiving (P)

**Table 2.** *Distribution of the Four MBTI Dimensions\**

	CEY Teachers ( $N = 63$ )	Norm MS Teachers ( $N = 1,128$ )	CEY Students ( $N = 1,247$ )
<b>E-I Dimension</b>			
E %	52.4	53.3	44.9
I %	47.6	46.7	55.1
<b>S-N Dimension</b>			
S %	17.5	55.1	26.4
N %	82.5	44.9	73.6
<b>T-F Dimension</b>			
T %	69.8	39.5	61.7
F %	30.2	60.5	38.3
<b>J-P Dimension</b>			
J %	65.1	65.7	39.7
P %	34.9		
	34.3	60.3	

*Note. \*The MBTI is a measure of preferences on four bipolar dimensions that are typically scored dichotomously: extraversion-introversion (E-I), sensing-intuition (S-N), thinking-feeling (T-F), and judging-perceiving (J-P).*

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study was to explore the background, personality type, and cognitive preferences of teachers of the exceptional and to compare the personality and cognitive styles of effective teachers with those of the exceptional students they teach. Findings indicated that, although many of the effective teachers had advanced degrees and the majorities were working in the field of education, few of them had formal training in exceptional education.

This sample of teachers appears to exemplify the notion of “teacher-scholars,” where teachers are experts in the area they teach (e.g., Bishop, 1968; Howley et al., 1986; Renzulli, 1997). The vast majority of these teachers held advanced degrees in their area of expertise, while few held formal teaching certificates and few had completed extensive coursework in exceptional education. Thus, it appears that formal training in the field of exceptional education may not be as important for teaching gifted students as a strong background and interest in an academic discipline. One of the most striking and consistent findings in this study was the observed match in personality styles between the academically talented students and the teachers. On both the thinking-feeling and the sensing- intuition dimensions of the MBTI, the academically talented students were more similar to the teachers than the normative sample of teachers. In fact, the CEY students differed significantly from the normative sample of teachers on each of the four dimensions of the MBTI, while demonstrating profiles strikingly similar to the effective teachers.

The most striking difference was seen on the sensing-intuition (S-N) dimension, where the majority of the exemplary CEY teachers showed a preference for an abstract and theoretical orientation (N). Individuals with a preference for N typically prefer to see the big picture, engage in abstract reasoning, and generate ideas; they tend to be innovative and intuitive and see patterns and themes. Additionally, individuals with an N preference are thought to prefer creative approaches (e.g., Thorne & Gough, 1991). It is likely that teachers with a preference for N are individuals who use creative approaches in their teaching and in their classrooms. Indeed, Bishop’s (1968) finding that exemplary teachers are often more imaginative and stimulating than other teachers supports this interpretation.

The only significant difference found between teachers and the exceptional CEY students was on the J-P dimension. Teachers reported a preference for judging (J). Individuals classified as Js have a preference for structure, order, and closure. Teachers’ observed preference for judging supports Bishop’s (1968) finding that teachers were more systematic and orderly than teachers not judged to be exemplary. In contrast, the CEY students reported a preference for perceiving (P). In comparing the teachers and students, it appears that teachers have a stronger need for structure and organization than the students they teach. However, there is some preliminary evidence that this might reflect a developmental difference, rather than a personality difference (Mills, Moore, & Parker, 1996).

The observed parallels in the personality of teachers and the exceptional students raise an important question regarding determinants of effective teaching: Are some teachers highly effective because they possess certain personality styles, or are some teachers effective because their personality styles more closely match their students’ personality styles? In summary, as evidenced by the prevalence of advanced degrees, these teachers appear to have a passion for their discipline. These exemplary teachers also appear to have a strong preference for the abstract and conceptual. Additionally, the teachers in this study had personality characteristics that, for the most part, mirrored the personality characteristics of the students they teach. These same personality characteristics set the exemplary teachers, and their students, apart from a normative population of teachers.

## IMPLICATIONS

The findings from this study, however, suggest that certification and formal training in exceptional and talented education may not be sufficient factors to consider when selecting teachers for them. Findings from this study suggest instead that it is equally important to select teachers with a strong background in the academic discipline being taught and those who have a passion for the subject matter. In addition to this expertise, certain personality characteristics and cognitive style preferences may be critical (although often ignored) factors to consider. Finally, it seems important for all teachers to be aware of how exceptional students may differ from their classmates in cognitive style preferences so that these differences can be recognized and validated. It may even be worthwhile for teachers involved in professional development workshops to be made aware of how cognitive preferences relate to learning and teaching styles and how recognition of style differences may translate into more effective teaching for all students. These suggestions warrant further research to document exactly how the match or mismatch between a teacher and student may affect learning either positively or negatively.

#### Conflict of interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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