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Trevor Capern  
*Edith Cowan University*

Lorraine Hammond  
*Edith Cowan University*

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## **Establishing Positive Relationships with Secondary Gifted Students and Students with Emotional/Behavioural Disorders: Giving These Diverse Learners What They Need**

Trevor Capern  
Lorraine Hammond  
Edith Cowan University  
[tcapern@our.ecu.edu.au](mailto:tcapern@our.ecu.edu.au)

*Abstract: The relationships between teachers and their students play a vital role in the creation of positive learning outcomes and environments for all learners, but particularly for those individuals with diverse needs. This study examined the teacher behaviours that contributed to positive student-teacher relationships with gifted secondary students (GS) (N=58) and with secondary students with Emotional/Behavioural Disorders (EBD) (N=40) in Western Australia. Valued teachers' behaviours were identified through a mixed-methods approach that included surveys and student focus groups. The data indicated that GSs valued teacher behaviours that promoted cordial and friendly interactions between teachers and students to the extent that these behaviours supported and extended student learning. While the importance of academic support was foremost in the minds of GSs, students with EBD instead valued teacher behaviours that displayed warmth, understanding and patience. For EBD students, these behaviours are the precursors to teachers supporting them in their learning. Comparisons between the behaviours that were identified by gifted students and students with EBD revealed a set of core behaviours that were deemed essential for developing positive relationships with both groups, but that each group specified a set of behaviours to address their unique needs.*

### **Introduction**

A large body of research indicates that relationships between teachers and their students play a vital role in creating positive learning outcomes and environments (Hattie, 2009; Blum, 2005; Klem & Connell, 2004; Pianta, 1999). Importantly for educators, some of this research examines *how* these relationships are formed (Wilkins, 2006; Cothran, Kulinna, & Garragy, 2003; Ozer, Wolf, & Kong, 2008) however, there is a lack of comparative research about how positive relationships are developed differently with particular groups of students. The benefit of positive student-teacher relationships is evident for all students (Hattie, 2009; Blum, 2005; Klem & Connell, 2004; Pianta, 1999), and appears to be especially important for gifted students (GS) and students with Emotional/Behavioural Disorders (EBD). In order to fully understand what teachers can do to develop quality relationships with these unique sets of pupils, this research sought to understand what some students want and need from their teachers. As part of a larger study that explored student and teacher perspectives on student-teacher relationships in Australia

and Canada, this research examined the perspectives of 58 gifted students and 40 students with EBD from six secondary schools in Western Australia and identified specific teacher behaviours that contribute to positive relationships with each group.

The daily interaction between students and teachers affects students' social, emotional, and academic wellbeing (Hattie, 2009; Klem & Connell, 2004; Davis, 2003; Resnick et al., 1997). Positive student-teacher relationships have been shown to increase student achievement and attitudes towards school (Cornelius-White, 2007). Hattie's (2009) comprehensive meta-analysis of 229 studies of student-teacher relationships revealed an effect size of 0.72 on student achievement, indicating a strong positive effect, and ranking student-teacher relationships 11<sup>th</sup> out of 138 possible influences on student achievement (p. 118). Other scholars have found that for gifted students strong positive relationships with their teachers may help bridge the gap between the student's potential and their achievement, a concern of educators for decades (McCoach & Siegle, 2003; Whitmore, 1980; Zilli, 1971). Characteristics that have commonly been associated with gifted student underachievement include negative attitudes towards school, teachers, and classes, low academic self-perception, and low motivation (Dowdall & Colangelo, 1982; Reis & McCoach, 2000; Whitmore, 1980). Based on our experience, these difficulties can be addressed through the development of positive relationships with teachers. Positive student-teacher relationships may also help to address the academic difficulties that students with EBD often encounter. Compared with their peers, students with EBD tend to have lower grades, experience more school failure, are more likely to be diagnosed with a learning disability (Frank, Sitlington, & Carson, 1995; Koyangi & Gaines, 1993), and experience dropout rates above 50% (Bullock & Gable, 2006; Marder, 1992). The foregoing research suggests that positive student-teacher relationships are valuable to all students, but the particular interest in this research is for these students with high academic risks.

Not only do strong student-teacher relationships help increase student academic achievement, but they are also crucial to the social-emotional development of students. In recent years, some studies have been dedicated to understanding the social-emotional needs of gifted and talented students (Cross, 2011; Csikszentmihalyi, Rathmunde, & Whalen, 1997; Delisle & Galbraith, 2002; Greene, 2003; Neihart, Reis, Robinson, & Moon, 2002; VanTassel-Baska, Cross, & Olenchak, 2009). It has been acknowledged that gifted and talented individuals must often face depression and feelings of isolation (Jacobsen, 1999; Weisse, 1990). At the same time, it has also been found that developing a sense of belonging in one's school can act as a protective factor against depression in gifted adolescents (Mueller, 2009). One way to increase a student's sense of belonging is to develop meaningful relationships with teachers. This is especially important for students with EBD, because these students are the least liked group of students (Baker, 2005) and show lower levels of satisfaction and affiliation than other students (Murray & Greenburg, 2001). Students with EBD have a higher risk than their peers for juvenile delinquency, incarceration at some point later on in life, and school dropout (Mihalas, Morse, Allsopp, & Alvarez McHatton, 2009); but EBD students can have their risk reduced through strong relationships with teachers (Wehlage, Rutter, Smith, & Fernandez, 1989).

Clearly, positive student-teacher relationships are important for the successful academic, social, and emotional development of all young people. Whereas there has been increasing recognition of the importance of addressing the social and emotional needs of gifted students, there is a lack of research regarding the relationships between gifted students and their teachers. Similarly, there is little literature on the effect of caring student-teacher relationships on outcomes for students with EBD (Mihalas et al., 2009). Furthermore, educational policy in

Western Australia does not directly address the importance of teaching relationships with either group of students. The Department of Education policy statement for students at educational risk, including those with EBD, states that a major component for managing students at educational risk is: “dissemination of good practice and support for the extension of good practice models” (DOE, n.d.b.). Because positive student-teacher relationships are so vital to students at risk, it would seem that a ‘catalogue’ of teacher behaviours that may be employed to help connect with these students would qualify as a ‘good practice model’; therefore the findings of this study would directly address the requirements of departmental policy. The Department of Education policy statement about the student-teacher relationships for gifted and talented students is even more vague. The policy states that “the abilities of gifted and talented students [should] be accepted, valued and fostered by teachers, parents, peers and the community” (DOE, n.d.a.). In order for teachers to foster giftedness, they must establish positive relationships with their exceptional pupils, and therefore the findings of this study may be used to address the departmental policy for gifted and talented students in Western Australia.

The literature also fails to address how strong student-teacher relationships are formed in practice. Cornelius-White (2007) identifies eight broad teacher-student relationship variables: non-directivity, empathy, warmth, encouragement of higher order thinking, encouraging learning, adapting to differences, genuineness, and learner-centred beliefs. These variables represent broad constructs that are difficult to concretely define in terms of what actions teachers take in developing relationships with students. More specifically, there is a lack of empirical research that addresses *how* teachers can develop positive and caring relationships with students with EBD (Murray & Greenburg, 2006). According to Woolfolk, Hoy and Weinstein (2006), “We need systematic inquiry into *how* [italics added] teachers establish and maintain positive, caring relationships with students” (p. 211). In this study, we attempted to address Woolfolk Hoy and Weinstein’s appeal by asking the students to identify the teacher behaviours that most strongly contribute to the development of positive relationships. Gifted students and students with EBD are both classified as exceptional, each with its own challenges and needs. The literature shows that positive student-teacher relationships benefit both groups, but more research is needed to understand the teacher behaviours that can be employed to develop positive relationships with either type of student.

## Literature Review

The main benefactors of strong student-teacher relationships are the students (Hattie, 2009; Blum, 2005; Klem & Connell, 2004; Pianta, 1999). In a study involving 4000 Canadian secondary school students, Bibby and Posterski (1992) found that good relationships were valued by the students more than any other aspect of their schooling. Research shows that there is good reason for all students to value relationships with their teachers; from high achievers, to students with emotional and behavioural problems. For example, Birch and Ladd (1997) reported a correlation between quality student-teacher relationships and increased academic achievement; whereas Noblit, Rogers and McCadden (1995) found that caring teacher-student relationships played a large part in encouraging academic development and social development.

There is a widespread assumption that gifted students exceed norms in all areas of development, score well on achievement tests, and are motivated and mature (Cline & Schwartz, 1999). However, it has been found that gifted students often do not fulfil this archetype (Winner,

1996). Gifted and talented students have the capacity for heightened sensitivity and often fall victim to feelings of “not belonging” due to their distinguishing abilities (Coleman, 1996). Resnick et al. (1997) found that protective factors against depression include environmental support (ie. school belonging), and can be addressed through having a positive relationship with at least one adult other than parents (Masten, 2001; McLoyd, 1998).

Students with EBD face numerous difficulties in school, as well as in life after school. Compared to their peers, these students are more likely to have lower grades, fail more courses in school, have higher absenteeism, drop out of school, and are less likely to graduate (Boreson, 2006; Reid, Gonzalez, Nordness, Trout, & Epstein, 2004; Shriner & Wehby, 2004). Students with EBD are also more likely to face incarceration at some point during their lives, and less likely to obtain post secondary education or maintain a stable job (Bullock & Gable, 2006; Carter & Lundsford, 2005; Gable, 2004; Quinn, Rutherford, Leone, Osher, & Poirier, 2005). To compound these difficulties, students with EBD have their voices heard the least, are empowered the least, and are the least liked group of students (Baker, 2005; Cooper, 2006; Lewis & Burman, 2008). With all of these obstacles to success, students with EBD have indicated that the relationship that they have with teachers is one of the most important factors in their success (Cefai & Cooper, 2010; Garner, 1993; Harris, Vincent, Thomson, & Toalster, 2006; Jahnuainen 2001; Pear, 1997; Sellman, 2009;).

Secondary school students of all backgrounds and abilities benefit from high quality relationships with their teachers, and strongly desire to have such connections. Drawing from qualitative data from a South Australian longitudinal study that ran from 1997 until 2005, Johnson (2008) identified “ordinary, everyday, relational, ‘little things’ that teachers do to promote their students’ resilience at school” (p.385). According to the 130 randomly selected students (aged 9-12) who were interviewed, these ‘little things’ included: being available and accessible to students, being interested in their lives, meeting regularly, listening, having honest and open discussions, teaching basic literacy and numeracy skills, being positive, intervening to help students, remembering personal events, and being able to enjoy a joke. These teacher behaviours are seen as supportive behaviours that contribute to the resilience of adolescents when dealing with adversity, and are also a component of good teacher-student relationships.

Similarly, Suldo et al. (2009) researched adolescents’ subjective wellbeing and the relation to teacher support in a south-eastern US state. The study was comprised of 401 middle school students who completed self-report measures of SWB, and eight focus groups for 50 students. Through the focus groups, the researchers were able to identify the following behaviours that convey high levels of social support in the eyes of students; conveying interest in student wellness, taking action to improve students’ moods and emotional states, giving students what they want, being sensitive and responsive to the entire class’ understanding of academic material, showing interest in individual student progress, using diverse teaching strategies, providing evaluative feedback on student performance, helping students improve their grades, ensuring a manageable workload, treating students similarly, punishing in a fair manner, and creating an environment in which questions are encouraged (Table 2, p. 75). Suldo et al. further dissected these behaviours to more specific teacher actions, and

...clarified that the types of teacher support most related to students’ life satisfaction are emotional support (students’ perceptions of how often teachers care about them, treat them fairly, and make it okay to ask questions) and instrumental support (the extent to which students perceive teachers make sure

they have what they need for school, take time to help them learn to do something well, and spend time with them when they need help). (p. 79)

Alder (2002) conducted a study of predominantly African American and economically disadvantaged middle school students to examine how caring relationships are created and maintained between these students and their teachers. Students valued teachers' willingness to:

- answer student questions
- teach to understanding
- help with academic problems
- talk to students individually and privately
- involve parents in the educative process

However, Alder also found most of these students thought the highest forms of teacher care were their willingness to be strict, have control over disruptive behaviour, and pressure students into getting work done (p. 250). In contrast, Suldo's (2009) study of "...middle-class, primarily Caucasian students in a suburban community, behaviors [*sic*] consistent with this authoritarian style of teaching (i.e., using an aversive voice tone and setting firm expectations and rules) were discussed as conveying *low* support" (p. 80). Thus, Suldo's findings "...indicate that student perceptions of caring teacher behaviors [*sic*] may differ across sociocultural contexts" (Suldo, 2009, p. 80).

As such, it is important to examine the differing student perspectives on teacher-student relationships across a wide variety of contexts and variables, such as age, ability, and social and cultural backgrounds. As already noted, the literature is limited in terms of gifted students' perceptions of their relationships with their teachers. In 2007, Gentry, Peters, and Mann undertook a qualitative study of 51 secondary students who attended a Career and Technical Education (CTE) centre and examined their perspectives on their CTE experience compared with their traditional high school experience. Specifically, interview responses from 16 students identified as talented were compared to those from general education students who were enrolled in the same CTE centre. It was found that the most frequently coded theme for talented students asked to reflect on their CTE experience was: effective, caring teachers, while for the general students, effective, caring teachers was the second most coded theme. For the talented students, the major themes that emerged were high levels of respect, a sense of professionalism on the part of the instructors, and an upbeat and positive discourse that all contributed to a positive atmosphere. "These findings underscore[d] the importance of teachers, relevance of material, and autonomy for all students, with special emphasis on teacher quality for talented secondary students" (Gentry et al., 2007, p. 396). These findings were similar to those found by Suk-Un Jin and Moon (2006), who noted that gifted Korean high school science students most strongly desired their teachers to be highly competent and display expertise in their subject matter.

The literature indicates that students with EBD are less concerned with teacher competence and expertise, and more concerned with having understanding and supportive relationships with teachers. In a review of eight studies about the perspectives of students with EBD in Malta, Cefai and Cooper (2010) found that the primary grievance of the students with EBD was a lack of understanding and support from their teachers. The students felt "isolated and victimised by their teachers" (p. 193) and described their poor relationships with teachers as "uncaring, autocratic, unfair and rigid" (p. 193). They identified their desire "to be respected, listened to and treated with dignity and understanding...to feel competent and successful...[and to] have a sense of responsibility and autonomy" (p.193), needs commonly expressed by all children and

young people (Deci et al., 1991). Accordingly, the Maltese students with EBD “warmed up to teachers who showed them care and understanding, listened to their concerns and supported them in their social and learning needs. They were ready to invest in teachers who respected them and believed in them despite their difficulties” (p. 193). In fact, Lowenthal (2001) found that even for students with EBD who rejected their teachers, the students still desired to have personal relationships with their instructors.

It is clear that students in different circumstances desire different behaviours from their teachers. More research is needed to explore the nature of teacher-student relationships in varying settings and across different contexts. However, the research shows that students all along the educational spectrum recognise that the everyday interactions they have with their teachers has a significant impact on their educational experience. “Ironically, many students seem to understand this better than some of their teachers” (Johnson, 2008, p. 395). As such, it is important to listen to the students perspectives on which teacher behaviours are important for developing positive relationships with them.

## Methods

The teacher behaviours that contribute to positive relationships with secondary gifted students and secondary students with EBD were examined using a mixed-methods approach. The study was conducted in Western Australian secondary schools that offer academic programs to students who are identified as gifted and talented, as well as in behaviour programs for students with EBD. The mixed-methods approach involved combining qualitative and quantitative research to gather and analyse data and to generate meaning, deep understanding, and a high quality of data interpretation (Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2004). The quantitative data was collected via surveys distributed to the participants, while the qualitative data was collected through focus groups.

The process of collecting data occurred over an 18 month period as part of a larger study that explored student and teacher perspectives on student-teacher relationships in Australia and Canada. Data collection began by issuing the Student-Teacher Relationship Survey – Student Version (STRSSV) to Year 9 and 10 students currently enrolled in gifted programs in Western Australia (N=58). Students who completed the survey were asked if they would be willing to participate in a focus group to discuss their views on their relationships with teachers for 30-60 minutes. Six students who indicated their willingness to participate were selected at random, contacted, and organised to meet for participation in the focus group. Data collection for students with EBD (N=40) was organised in a similar fashion. Twelve students who indicated their willingness to participate were selected at random, contacted, and organised to meet for participation in the focus groups.

The instrument used to collect the quantitative student data was the Student-Teacher Relationship Survey – Student Version. As there is no large-scale validated instrument for measuring student-teacher relationships in secondary schools, items were compiled from Malecki, Demaray, and Elliot’s (2000) Child and Adolescent Social Support Scale (CASSS), Wilkins’ (2006) Student-Teacher Relationship Survey: Student Version, and from the teacher behaviours that convey high levels of support identified in Suldo et al.’s 2009 study. Cronbach’s alpha was calculated as a test of reliability on the student version of the survey. The student surveys had a Cronbach’s alpha score of 0.96 for both gifted students and students with EBD,

indicating high reliability. These figures compare favourably with those from Wilkins' (2006), Suldo et al. (2009), and Malecki and Demeray (2000), which all had reliability coefficients ranging from .83 to .93. There were 70 items on the survey, with each item representing a teacher behaviour. Items were scored on a six point Likert scale format (6 = very strongly agree to 1 = very strongly disagree) regarding how important each behaviour was for developing a positive relationship with students. Mean scores were used to rank the teacher behaviours, with higher mean scores indicating higher importance in the development of positive relationships. Open-ended questions were included at the end of each survey in order to probe for further teacher behaviours that may not have been listed within the other 70 items.

Focus groups were conducted with students in order to verify and validate the findings of the surveys conducted. The participating programs consisted of two gifted programs and two programs for students with EBD. The focus groups consisted of six students from each program, with the exception of one of the gifted programs, which had no students volunteer to participate in the focus group. Focus group discussions centred on several questions that included probing questions in order to triangulate data from the surveys, as well as uncover new data. Survey data was analysed prior to conducting the focus groups so that participants could be asked to provide reflections on findings from the survey. The triangulation of data ensured dependability (Merriam, 1998) and established convergence, as the different methods agreed (Mathison, 1988).

Participants were asked to describe good relationships, and what teachers do to help build positive relationships. Students were also asked to reflect on their own experiences and to compare how some teachers are better at developing relationships. Participants were invited to discuss the teacher behaviours that address their academic needs and personal/emotional needs, and how those behaviours contributed to positive relationships. Probing questions were asked to allow students to expand on certain topics in order to gain an understanding of the perspectives they brought from their personal experiences. Focus group discussions were recorded and transcribed to provide a record. The transcripts were coded and categorised according to emerging themes. A coding system suggested by Bogden and Biklen (1998) was used to establish codes.

## **Results**

### **Gifted Students**

Survey data and student focus groups provided a clear picture of the most important teacher behaviours identified by gifted students as contributing to the development of positive relationships with their teachers. On the student survey, the 10 behaviours receiving the highest mean scores represented the most important behaviours and are presented below (mean scores in parentheses):

1. Not discriminate against specific students due to race, ability level, etc. (5.55)
2. Give students enough time to complete assignments and/or prepare for tests (5.45)
3. Allow students to get help from other students (5.43)
4. Go beyond using the textbook and use additional information via movies, Internet, field trips, and personal stories (5.40)
5. Treat me with respect (5.36)
6. Explain things I don't understand (5.34)
7. Show respect for me by maintaining my privacy and being honest with me (5.31)
8. Be able to take a joke (5.29)

9. Give all students equal chances to participate in class and on assignments (5.28)

10. Try to solve problems instead of automatically punishing (5.26)

The behaviours identified on the survey as the most important centred on supporting the students' academic success whilst treating the students equally and with respect.

Gifted student responses to the open-ended survey question and behaviours most commonly identified in focus groups were combined and are listed below in Tab. 1. The major themes that emerged from the focus group included: promoting academic success, being approachable (including having a sense of humour), and treating students fairly and equally.

Theme	Most Important Behaviours
Promoting Academic Success	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Allow students to work at their own pace and give appropriate time for assignments</li> <li>• Allow students to talk in class and help each other</li> <li>• Have fun activities in class, but keep students on task</li> <li>• Show passion and enthusiasm for the subject</li> <li>• Be available to help students catch up on work and prepare for exams</li> <li>• Extend students through extra-curricular activities and using external resources</li> <li>• Be knowledgeable about the subject</li> <li>• Give work according to students' abilities</li> <li>• Let students know you will help them and they can ask questions</li> <li>• Show students how to improve</li> <li>• Get to know student interests in the subject and encourage students based upon interests</li> <li>• Give class time to work on homework</li> <li>• Encourage students to pursue their interests</li> </ul>
Being Approachable	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Does not make fun of students for making mistakes</li> <li>• Say "Hi" to me</li> <li>• Smile</li> <li>• Act happy to see me</li> <li>• Know and use student names</li> <li>• Does not yell or get angry</li> <li>• Be polite when giving feedback</li> <li>• Discuss common interests with students</li> <li>• Display a sense of humour, including anecdotes</li> <li>• Able to laugh at jokes</li> <li>• Able to laugh at self</li> <li>• Listens to everyone's questions</li> <li>• Do not ask too many personal questions</li> </ul>
Treating Students Equally and Fairly	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Gives the same amount of attention to each student</li> <li>• Consistency in marking for all students</li> <li>• Listens to what everyone has to say</li> <li>• Gives all students equal opportunities to participate</li> <li>• Trust students to do their work without constantly redirecting them</li> <li>• When a student notices a teacher error, allow for discussion regarding the error</li> </ul>

**Table 1. Most important teacher behaviours identified in focus groups – gifted students.**

Students indicated that in order to have positive relationships with teachers, teachers needed to engage in behaviours that supported student academic success. Behaviours that encouraged students to extend their learning and eased anxiety about academic performance were particularly valued by students, as students identified these as the foundation from which relationships could further develop with their instructors. Students indicated that when classes are engaging and they felt that they had multiple avenues to learn, it strengthened the relationship with their teachers. In discussing one of her favourite teachers, Dr. Garnett, Jen said:

Yeah cos Dr. Garnett, he's always like coming back from his weekend or something or the next day saying 'You know I was thinking about this class' and there's always excursions or something or professionals coming to talk to us and I think that really makes the subject more interesting and the teacher a lot more nicer because you know that they're going that little bit extra to help the class and that.

Students also identified a number of teacher behaviours that allowed them to feel confident in approaching their teachers for help and to feel comfortable in their classroom. The behaviours showed that students appreciated a warm, amicable demeanour in their teachers. Students explained how they felt welcome in class when discussing their science class with one of their favourite teachers:

Mary I think the first thing that he said when we walked into his classroom was like 'Hello, and welcome' and how he says that every day-

Jen And he says that every single day -

Mary And 'Good afternoon' or 'Good morning', but it's just something he does, but it just seems so warm and friendly - he's such a good teacher.

Researcher Okay, good. So the combination of he's warm, he's friendly...

Kim He's always happy, he's like - he never gets angry - I don't think I've ever seen him yell at anyone before.

A sense of humour was highly valued, and students were able to identify behaviours that they felt demonstrated a sense of humour. Avoiding anger was also seen by students as essential to having a good relationship. Students noted that while they appreciated having individual relationships with teachers, they wanted their teachers to keep a professional distance and not get too involved in their lives.

Researcher So it's like if they can help you out, then it's okay?

Kylie Yeah, once in a while.

Researcher But if it starts happening too much...

Jen Yeah.

Mary It would get a bit suspicious.

Jen Yeah, like your thing about the weekend, like if they ask that on a Monday or something, that's fine, but when they keep asking you all the - like, I reckon if they kept asking you the whole entire time and kept asking you all these questions you'd get a bit creeped out.

Gifted students also emphasised behaviours that made them feel that they were being treated equally and fairly. Behaviours that were identified centred mostly on ensuring that students had equal opportunities for participating, as well as avoiding favouritism. Listening to students and being consistent in their treatment was also mentioned as being important:

Kylie Well he always listens to everyone's questions. He gives the same amount of attention to each student.

Jen Yeah, like what Kylie says, and when students are misbehaving or something and teachers give them more leeway than others because they like them or something, then that's a bit annoying.

### **Students with EBD**

Survey data and student focus groups provided a clear picture of the most important teacher behaviours identified by students with EBD as contributing to the development of positive relationships with their teachers. On the student survey, the 10 behaviours receiving the highest mean scores represented the most important behaviours and are presented below (mean scores in parentheses):

1. Not discriminate against specific students due to race, ability level, etc. (5.50)
2. Be patient with me (5.40)
3. Be able to take a joke (5.38)
3. Listen if I have something to say (5.38)
3. Give equal attention and praise amongst students (5.38)
3. Treat me with respect (5.38)
4. Be willing to explain things again (5.35)
4. Give me a chance to explain myself (5.35)
4. Tell me nicely when I make mistakes (5.35)
5. Enforce rules fairly (5.33)

The behaviours identified on the survey as the most important centred on teachers being patient with students, listening to students, and treating students with fairness.

Responses to the open-ended survey question and behaviours most commonly identified in focus groups for students with EBD were combined and are listed below in Tab. 2. Students were asked to reflect on what it means to have a good relationship with their teacher, and which teacher behaviours contributed to positive relationships with them. Students were asked to identify specific teacher behaviours and explain how those behaviours contributed to positive relationships. The major themes that emerged from the focus group included: having a warm/friendly disposition, talking with and listening to students, and supporting student learning.

Theme	Most Important Behaviours
Having a warm/friendly disposition	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Smile</li> <li>• Laugh</li> <li>• Be polite</li> <li>• Don't get angry or yell</li> <li>• Use teacher first names</li> <li>• Be in a good mood/be cheerful</li> <li>• Be able to laugh at self</li> <li>• Greet students</li> <li>• Have relaxed, inviting body language</li> <li>• Avoid being dictatorial</li> <li>• Forgive students for misbehaviour (don't hold grudges)</li> <li>• Treat students equally</li> <li>• Give students responsibility</li> </ul>
Talking and listening to students	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Talk with students about their personal interests and common interests</li> <li>• Have casual conversations</li> <li>• Tell students about yourself</li> <li>• Respect student privacy/confidentiality</li> <li>• Listen if a student is having a bad day</li> <li>• Make eye contact when talking with students</li> <li>• Talk to students as equals</li> <li>• Be nice when redirecting students</li> <li>• Give feedback privately</li> <li>• Allow students space and time if they have an emotional episode</li> </ul>
Supporting student learning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Be patient with students</li> <li>• Show students step-by-step how to do something</li> <li>• Circulate class and ask students if they need help, don't wait for students to ask</li> <li>• Sit with students one-on-one and walk them through their work</li> <li>• Don't get frustrated at a student for getting an answer wrong</li> <li>• Help all students, not just a select few</li> <li>• Keep student results private</li> <li>• Be happy when students do well</li> <li>• Give generous amount of time to complete assignments (or no deadline at all)</li> </ul>

**Table 2. Most important teacher behaviours identified in focus groups – students with EBD**

The most important theme that emerged for students was their teachers demonstrating behaviours that displayed a warm, friendly disposition. Students expressed that the teacher behaviours that demonstrated a warm, friendly disposition allowed them to feel comfortable,

equal, and connected with their teachers. Students also explained that when their teachers acted happy to see them, it increased their comfort levels and made them feel welcome:

Megan [Teachers should] Take an interest in me showing up.

Researcher Okay, so if you're showing up and I acknowledge that, how does that make you feel?

Megan Better, rather than just – I don't know...when I walk into the classroom every morning teachers and students, just everyone: 'Morning! How was your weekend?' or 'How was last' - you know, whatever.

Sarah And if they say it with a big smile.

Brian Something like if they reward you for – if they make you feel like you accomplished something just for coming to school.

Students with EBD also stressed the importance of teachers talking with them for developing positive relationships. Students described conversations that were not related to school, and involved getting to know them and their interests. Brian described how having conversations beyond the classroom with his teachers helped him connect with them:

When I had a conversation [with my teacher], then we got on quite well. I got the feeling like they didn't understand me – like, [other teachers] didn't understand what I was talking about and that. Like they didn't give me a chance to talk to them and get to know them and that... I know you're not meant to get to know your teacher and that, but it helps you get on better in class if you know that the teacher likes you, I think.

The importance of teachers helping students with their work and being patient and understanding of student progress was also identified by students with EBD. Students expressed that by helping them with their work, teachers were showing that they cared for students:

Monica I like it when a teacher will come and ask you if you're stuck or 'Do you need to go over it?' or does – then they can explain it better.

Researcher So does that help you to have a better relationship with that teacher?

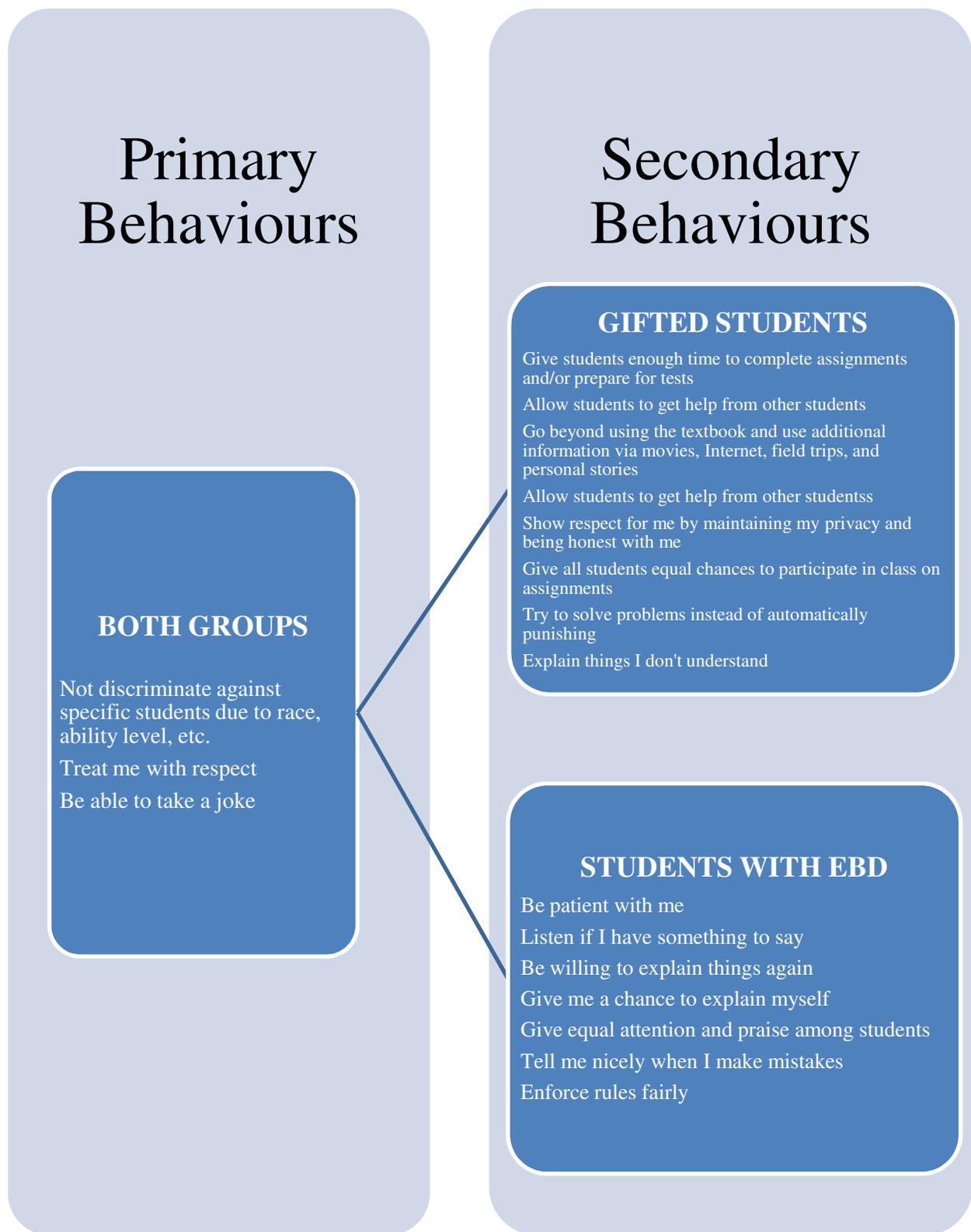
Monica Yeah, because then you've – some part that they actually might care, in some ways, of your education and stuff.

There was general agreement that students appreciated when teachers would give them one-on-one attention and be patient with them until they understood. Megan discussed one of her favourite teachers, and how she helped with her school work:

Kris is a really good teacher. She'll sit with you until you understand it. If you don't understand it, she'll make you understand it, but she'll make sure by the end of that lesson, she'll make sure that you know what you're doing and it's easy for you. And she's always offering help and she'll explain it until you understand. But nicely, calmly, she's not – never judges you...

## Discussion

This research involved Western Australian secondary students who had been identified as gifted or as having EBD. Results of the study found that gifted students and students with EBD held different views as to which behaviours were most important for developing positive relationships with their teachers. Gifted students put a greater emphasis on behaviours that would help them achieve academically, whereas students with EBD emphasised the importance of teacher behaviours that showed caring and understanding, and demonstrated patience and support for their learning. Although these views did diverge, there was general agreement on behaviours that formed the foundations of positive relationships. Students found common ground on primary behaviours that were effective for developing positive relationships with either group, but then diverged when it came to secondary essential behaviours. The secondary essential behaviours revealed that gifted students preferred teacher behaviours that contributed to academic success and cordial interactions with their teachers, and that students with EBD preferred teacher behaviours that displayed understanding, patience, and multiple opportunities to learn. Fig. 1 presents a visual representation of the most important teacher behaviours for developing positive relationships with both groups of students.



**Figure 1 Most important behaviours for developing positive relationships – gifted students and students with EBD.**

Both groups emphasised the importance of teachers treating them with respect, being warm and friendly, and helping them with their schoolwork, universally recognised characteristics that have been found to be desired by students from a multitude of backgrounds (Alder, 2002; Deci et al., 1991; Johnson, 2008; Phelan, Davidson & Cao, 1992; Poplin & Weeres, 1994; Turley, 1994). Gifted students put a greater emphasis on teacher behaviours that promoted academic success and advancement, which has been found to be true for gifted students in other studies (Gentry, Peters, & Mann, 2007; Suk-Un Jin & Moon, 2006). Students with EBD placed a greater emphasis on affective teacher behaviours that promoted personal relationships with their teachers and included listening, patience, and understanding. These findings are consistent with findings in other studies involving students with EBD (Cefai & Cooper, 2010; Daniels et al., 2003; Kroeger et al., 2004; Lowenthal, 2001; McIntyre & Battle, 1998; Wise, 2000; Dods, 2013). While both groups of students agreed on the basic foundations of relationships, it was evident that gifted students and students with EBD had their own unique set of needs and required a unique set of teacher behaviours in order to develop positive relationships with their teachers.

Students with EBD placed a greater emphasis on the importance of emotionally supportive behaviours than their gifted peers, indicating that they wanted to get to know their teachers at a personal level and feel that their teachers cared about their emotional states and circumstances. These findings are consistent with findings from other studies with students with EBD (Cefai & Cooper, 2010; McIntyre & Battle, 1998; Konkol & Owens, 2004; Dods, 2013).

Gifted students put a much larger emphasis on academically supportive behaviours. While certain emotionally supportive behaviours were considered crucial, the majority of emotionally supportive behaviours on the surveys were held in low regard. Gifted students wanted their teachers to be polite, friendly, and display a sense of humour, but to respect their personal boundaries. Gifted students viewed academic support as the foundation for positive relationships, as they felt that these behaviours allowed teachers to fulfil their primary role of educational facilitators. These findings were consistent with findings from other studies involving gifted students (Gentry et al., 2007; Mills, 2003; Suk-Un Jin & Moon, 2006).

The types of behaviours that were most important for developing positive relationships differed between the two groups, indicating that each group of students required a unique behaviour set to address their unique needs. The behaviours enacted to develop positive relationships with each group specifically attended to the unique needs that have been identified in the literature for each group of students (Baker, 2005; Cooper, 2006; Gresham & MacMillan, 1997; Lane et al., 2006; Lovecky, 1992; Mendaglio, 2003; Piechowski, 1999; Van Tassel-Baska, MacFarlane, & Feng, 2008). Addressing the unique needs of students revealed different types of students required somewhat different types of interactions with their teachers in order to form positive relationships.

This research filled a gap in the literature by identifying teacher behaviours that contributed to positive student-teacher relationships with gifted secondary students and secondary students with EBD and by comparing and contrasting the behaviours that were most effective with each group. Many of the behaviours identified for both groups were consistent with behaviours identified in other studies (Wilkins, 2006; Suldo et al., 2009) with moderate variations for each group. This suggests that there are teacher behaviours that are universally effective for developing positive relationships with all students, but that unique students require unique behaviour sets to fully develop a positive relationship. It would be worthy of future research to investigate the teacher behaviours that most strongly contribute to positive

relationships with students with other exceptionalities, including, but not limited to: intellectual disabilities, learning disabilities, physically dependent, deaf-blind, chronic health impairments, deaf or hard of hearing, visual impairments and Autism Spectrum Disorder. It would also be worthwhile to research which behaviours are most important for developing positive relationships with mainstream students with no exceptionalities, and to compare those behaviours across geographical, social, and cultural contexts. Further, this study examined positive relationships with gifted students and students with EBD as two different groups and did not take into account the existence of twice exceptional students – gifted students with EBD. No students in this study were identified as being twice exceptional, as gifted students with EBD are often not referred to, or have been removed from, gifted programs due to their behaviour (Reid & McGuire, 1995). These students have been found to have their behaviour problems linked mostly with boredom, as they waited for further instruction while their peers finished their work (Neu, 1993). These issues were not generally described by students with EBD in this study, indicating that twice exceptional students would have needs that might be different from both gifted students and students with EBD. Further research with this population would be valuable, and has been called for (Reis & McCoach, 2002).

The results of this study also have implications for teacher training institutions and professional development for in-service teachers. The behaviours identified in this study are practical, employable behaviours that may be taught to pre-service and in-service teachers to help them improve relationships with students who are gifted or who have EBD. Positive relationships improve academic and affective development for students (Hattie, 2009), and therefore teachers who know how to create positive relationships with their students will be more effective than those who do not. Further studies may examine video and audio recording classrooms where teachers employ these behaviours, so that pre-service and in-service teachers may have a visual reference as to how to properly enact these behaviours. While some survey items might be difficult to teach (i.e. having a sense of humour), the qualitative data provides more specific behaviours that are easily understood (i.e. the use of subject-related cartoons on a test displays a sense of humour).

The findings of this study are important for educators, as they may be used to improve relationships with particular types of students and increase the effectiveness of their practice. These findings hold value to teachers, students, administrators, and educational training institutions, as they may help to bridge the gap between educational theory and practice. The frameworks established for developing positive relationships with these exceptional students may be employed to improve social and academic outcomes for students and contribute to positive learning environments, and therefore are important to the field of educational research.

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