



Research Article

The Relationship of Interpersonal and Leadership Skills with Empathic Understanding among Malaysian Gifted Students

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Abstract

Gifted students have always been considered as individuals who absorb with their own world; and sometimes are lacking in interpersonal skills and empathic understanding which prevent them to live comfortably within the society. This study was conducted in order to examine eight dimension of interpersonal skills and their relationships with empathic understanding among Malaysian gifted students. The study used a survey method and data was collected using an instrument called the Malaysian Emotional Quotient Inventory (MEQI) from a total of 240 (male=81, female=159) respondents, aged 15 years old from the PERMATApintar™ College, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia. Overall findings show that all dimension of interpersonal skills studied correlate positively with empathy ($p < 0.00$, $n = 240$) and the r values for all dimensions are more than 0.60. Similarly, findings from the study show that all domains of empathy correlate positively with leadership skills. The r values for all correlations are from 0.253 to 0.788 ($p < 0.01$). Empathy domains that have the strong correlation with leadership skills are political awareness, followed by leveraging diversity, developing other's potential, caring and helping others. Based on the findings, implications toward the unique provision of counseling services and self-development programs for local gifted students' population were discussed.

Keywords

empathy; gifted students; interpersonal skills; leadership skills; Malaysia

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Introduction

As any normal population, gifted students have diverse personality traits and characteristics (Schreglmann, 2016). Although, research works have shown that gifted students have certain commonality, this diverse population of students requires special support system from different quarters including the counseling provision (Bakar & Zakaria, 2018; Ishak & Bakar, 2014; Wood, 2010; Peterson, 2006). Gifted students are commonly associated with unique psychological characters and emotional issues. They are said to be perfectionists with some having issues of low self-esteem. They are also said to be highly competitive that could have negative impact on their psychological well-beings. They were also associated with social related issues in educational setting such as adjustment, isolation, and peers' acceptance (Bakar & Ishak, 2014; Cross, Cassady, Dixon & Adams, 2008; Yoo & Moon, 2006). Indeed, gifted and talented students are said to be having trouble in mastering some humanistic skills; for instance, feeling of empathy, which is detrimental in establishing the positive social relationships with their peers. Nonetheless, they also have positive characteristics that could help push their potential to a greater height (Gunther, Evans, Mefford & Coe, 2007).

One of the positive characteristics that have been research extensively is empathy among gifted and talented students. Keskin (2014) stressed out that empathy is a significant factor in building interpersonal relationship among individuals, whereas Lopes, Salovey and Straus (2003) posited that empathy influences the personality display of every individual. In addition, Gunther et al. (2007), empathy is a basic human attribute, a developmental phenomenon appearing early in childhood. It allows a person to comprehend or share a frame of reference with another person (p. 197). Goleman (1998) who examine empathy from emotional intelligence perspective suggested that the variable should be seen from one's ability to understand others, helping others, developing others' potential, providing services to others, work with diverse group of individuals, are aware of dynamics evolving around his or her environment, and constantly display the caring attitude towards others. In other words, empathy is an individual's vicariously emotional response to other's emotional reactions (Ali, Amorin & Chamorro-Premuzic, 2009). Studies have also shown that empathy is highly correlated with leadership, which is a broad competency that consists of two elements; how one manages oneself (building self-confidence, and self-control, and developing responsible behaviors), and how one manages others (conflict management, change catalyst, team capabilities, effective communication etc.). According to Goleman, Boyatzis and Mckee (2002), great leaders have more than just skills and knowledge in their routine. They represent individuals who are visionary, very objective, and sensitive towards their environment (Lovecky, 1997; Mendaglio, 1995) and have powerful ideas that can change the world. All in all,

good leader is someone who not only display caring attitude but understand his or her followers frame of reference (Khodabakhsh & Besharat, 2011; Gunther et al., 2007; Kellett, Humprey & Sleeth, 2002).

In accordance with the Malaysian government effort to strengthen the dimensional growth of gifted education, this study was conducted with aim to evaluate the relationship of interpersonal skills – the abilities to influence others, to be a catalyst for change, to bond with others, to work cooperatively/collaboratively, to work in a team, and to communicate effectively – and leadership skills with empathy among local gifted students. The implication of the findings towards the unique provision of counseling services and self-development programs for gifted students' population were discussed.

Methodology

This study employed a survey method and data was collected using an instrument known as Malaysian Emotional Quotient Inventory (MEQI) which measures 30 elements of emotional intelligence suggested by Goleman (1998), developed by a group of researchers from Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia. However, for the purpose of this study, only elements that involve social skills, leadership skills and empathy were administered. Interpersonal skills dimensions being measured are: Influencing Others ($\alpha = 0.851$), Conflict Management ($\alpha = 0.820$), Leadership ($\alpha = 0.914$), Change Catalyst ($\alpha = 0.817$), Building Bonds ($\alpha = 0.935$), Cooperation/Collaboration ($\alpha = 0.901$), Team Capabilities ($\alpha = 0.872$), and Communication ($\alpha = 0.890$). On the other hand, leadership skills were measured using 45 items that measure self and people's management ($\alpha=0.892$). Finally, empathy is measured by 35 items that looked into the ability to; understand others, helping others, developing others potential, servicing others, leveraging diversity, awareness towards political dynamics and to care for other. Cronbach Alpha values for all empathy domains range from 0.831 to 0.927. All Cronbach Alpha values mentioned suggest that the instrument used is very reliable over time.

A total of 240 Malaysian gifted students (male=81, female=159) were participated in the study. These students were selected to participate in a summer enrichment program organized by the Malaysian National Gifted Centre, also known as Pusat PERMATApintar™ Negara, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia. To ease data collection process, the students were grouped in a hall and they were asked to response to the items in the questionnaire for 40 minutes to one hour.

Results

Data collected from the study were descriptively analyzed and Table 1 shows mean scores for all interpersonal skills dimensions and empathy. In general, the gifted students participated in this study indicated middle to high possession of

interpersonal skills in which mean scores for all dimensions range from 76.208 to 86.250, with the highest was being the ability to influence others (Mean = 86.250, SD = 9.108) and the lowest being the ability to build bonds with others (Mean = 76.208, SD = 11.777). Likewise, data suggested that the participants of this study have high level of empathy (Mean = 84.167, SD = 8.159).

Table 1.

Descriptive Statistics of Interpersonal Skill Dimensions and Empathy

		N	Mean	Std. Deviation
A	Influencing Others	240	86.250	9.108
B	Conflict Management	240	85.883	17.287
C	Leadership	240	85.111	8.644
D	Change Catalyst	240	80.517	21.369
E	Building Bond	240	76.208	11.777
F	Cooperation/Collaboration	240	79.708	12.098
G	Teamwork	240	84.833	16.073
H	Communication	240	85.792	8.092
	Empathy	240	84.167	8.159

The data was also analyzed using Pearson Product-Moment Correlation and the coefficient value was calculated for all interpersonal skill dimensions against empathy. Results of the analysis are shown in Table 2. Empathy was found to be strongly correlated with all social skills dimensions. The r values range from 0.365 to 0.928. The strongest correlation is between empathy and leadership dimension ($r = 0.928$, $r^2 = 0.861$, $p < 0.01$), followed by empathy and ability to influence others ($r = 0.709$, $r^2 = 0.502$, $p < 0.01$), empathy and communication ($r = 0.700$, $r^2 = 0.490$, $p < 0.01$), and between empathy and cooperation/collaboration dimension ($r = 0.601$, $r^2 = 0.361$). The remaining dimensions show between low to moderate strength of correlation with empathy. The r^2 values suggest associations between the two variables being analyzed; as such, empathy is associated 86% with the social skill dimension of leadership, 50% with ability to influence others, 49% with communication, and 36% with cooperation/collaboration dimension of social skills.

Table 2.*Correlations between Dimension of Interpersonal Skills and Empathy*

	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H
r	.709**	.492**	.928**	.229**	.574**	.601**	.365**	.700**
Empathy p	.000	.000	.000	.000	.000	.000	.000	.000
n	240	240	240	240	240	240	240	240

**significant at 0.01

Table 3, on the other hand shows the mean scores for all empathy domains and leadership skills. The mean scores ranged from 76.363 to 87.633. These results suggest that the gifted students participated in the study have high empathy especially in the abilities to care for others (Mean = 85.867, SD = 9.735), to be aware of the political dynamics surrounding them (Mean = 87.183, SD = 9.984), to interact with diverse group of individuals, (Mean = 86.600, SD = 9.157), to provide services for others (Mean = 87.633, SD = 22.021), to help others, and to understand others. In terms of skills to lead, it can be seen that the participated students encompass considerably high leadership skills (Mean = 83.651, SD = 8.092).

Table 3.

Descriptive Statistics of Empathy Domains and Leadership Skills

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
A Understanding Others	240	80.625	13.034
B Helping Others	240	84.810	8.259
C Developing Others' Potential	240	76.363	7.903
D Service Orientation	240	87.633	22.021
E Leveraging Diversity	240	86.600	9.157
F Political Awareness	240	87.183	9.984
G Caring	240	85.867	9.735
Leadership Skills	240	83.651	8.092

Table 4 shows the correlation values between leadership skills and all independent domains of empathy. The values range from 0.253 to 0.788. Correlation between leadership skills and political awareness is the highest ($r = 0.788$, $r^2 = 0.620$, $p < 0.01$), followed by r value for leadership skills and leveraging diversity or the ability to work with various group of individuals ($r = 0.785$, $r^2 = 0.616$, $p < 0.01$). Other coefficient values that are also worth mentioning is between leadership skills and both domains of caring and developing others' potential ($r = 0.684$, $r^2 = 0.468$, $p < 0.01$), leadership skills and helping others ($r = 0.669$, $r^2 = 0.448$, $p < 0.01$), and between leadership skills and understanding others ($r = 0.563$,

$r^2 = 0.317$, $p < 0.01$). The r^2 values suggest associations between the two variables being analyzed; as such, 62% of the emphatic domain of political awareness while 61% of the leveraging diversity domain is associated with leadership skills of an individual. Moreover, about 47% of caring and developing others' potential are associated with leadership skills, whereas about 45% association was found between leadership skills and emphatic domain of helping others.

Table 4.

Correlations between Leadership Skills and Domains of Empathy

		A	B	C	D	E	F	G
Leadership Skills	r	.563**	.669**	.684**	.253**	.785**	.788**	.684**
	p	.000	.000	.000	.000	.000	.000	.000
	n	240	240	240	240	240	240	240

**significant at 0.01

Discussions and Conclusion

All eight dimensions of interpersonal skill were found to be positively correlated with empathy, as being indicated by many established researchers (Riggio, Tucker & Coffaro, 1989; Eisenberg & Miller, 1987). The three strongest correlations exist between empathy and leadership skill, empathy and ability to influence others, and between empathy and communication. Adams (1983) and Khodabakhsh and Besharat (2011) suggested that empathy and social skills are significant factors in building positive interpersonal relationship among individuals; therefore, in the context of these gifted students, any programs introduced by counselors to enhance empathic understanding among the students will directly increase their leadership capability by 86% ($r^2 = 0.861$), ability to influence others by 50% ($r^2 = 0.502$), communication skill by 49% ($r^2 = 0.490$), and cooperation/collaboration by 36% ($r^2 = 0.361$). Thus, counselors for gifted students should focus on providing training in the skills that are not strongly correlated to their emphatic understanding namely, the team capabilities and change catalyst.

In addition, the results show that the respondents have both good emphatic understanding and good dimensional range of interpersonal skills. These findings seem to contradict with other studies which suggested that gifted students generally faced problems in their social interactions, particularly within the learning environment (Wood, 2010; Neihart, Reis, Robinson & Moon, 2002). Probably, this is due to the eastern culture which always promotes sense of caring for others. Nonetheless, the finding also indicated that the students had difficulty in building bond with others. The question to ponder is, whether the indication of good empathy and interpersonal skills among these students only occurred at the surface level. In order to develop an intimate relationship, gifted students need to bond

with others; in other words, the inability to bond put them at a disadvantage in developing meaningful relationship with their significant others (Patterson, Field & Pryor, 1995; Lempers & Lempers, 1992). Moreover, it might affect their capabilities to cooperatively collaborate or work with others. Therefore, when working with the gifted and talented students, counselors need to focus to:

- understand the relational dynamics in order to help gifted and talented students overcome the bonding issue and establish meaningful relationship with their significant others,
- teach the gifted and talented students about the importance of bonding as a social support system,
- teach the gifted and talented students to trust others (despite their high level of self-competitiveness) to gain support from others

By paying attention to these issues, counselors for gifted students should be able to formulate counseling programs and guidance activities to mount the students' bonding and cooperating/collaborating skills such as teambuilding workshop, group cohesiveness seminar, and peer counseling session.

Finding from the study also shows that leadership skills correlate positively with all domains of empathy, in particular political awareness, leveraging diversity, caring, helping others, understanding others, and developing others' potential. Specifically, the study shows that respondents scored high in all domains of empathy, in particular, the ability to leverage with diverse group of individuals, to provide services for others, to care for others and to understand and help others. The findings also show that the students have high political awareness and as such, are aware of the dynamics (including interactional in nature) surrounding them. These findings seem to be in line with the previous findings which suggest that gifted and talented students are sensitive to their environment. According to Goleman (1998), individuals who have high empathy are able to care for others, and these characteristics are necessary for leaders. This finding also supports other studies that look at the relationship between empathy and leadership skills. The domains mentioned above are necessary traits for leaders. According to Goleman (2000), aside from the ability to manage self, effective leaders must also have strong ability to manage others. They must be able to help and understand others, work with individuals from different background, the overall empathy score still shows that the respondents have moderate to high level of empathy. With regards to relationship between empathy and leadership, this study was able to show that all domains of empathy correlate positively with leadership skills. As such, both variables complement each other. Individuals involved in providing education to the gifted students should be aware of such relationship because then intervention can be developed based on the two variables. When providing counseling services,

for instance, school counselor who attempted to provide a leadership program for the gifted students should also include element of empathy in the program. Aside from strengthening the domains that were identified as strengths, emphasis should also be given on domain that was identified as their weakness (service orientation). By having such a holistic leadership program, the school counselor will be able to develop interventions that will help the gifted students to be well rounded adolescents.

In summary, despite the common assumptions that gifted students are a group of socially incompetent individuals, this study revealed that Malaysian gifted students are relatively competent in their emphatic understanding and most of their social skill dimensions. Concomitantly, local counselors who inspire to work with this unique population of students in the future, have to carefully tailor their counseling programs and guidance activities to fulfil the gaps described in this study. The present study is just an initial study to explore relationships between interpersonal and leadership skills, and domains of empathy. More studies should be conducted to examine in greater depth of these relationships. Study that focuses on effectiveness of interventions to help gifted students become better leaders equipped with sufficient interpersonal skills and sound emphatic understanding should also be considered.

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