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## Dimensions of social skills and their relationship with empathy among gifted and talented students in Malaysia

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### Abstract

Gifted and talented students have always be considered as individuals who are absorb with their own world. Nonetheless, as part of the living community, they are required to interact with their environments. Concomitantly, they need the necessary social skills and empathic understanding to live comfortably within the society. This study examines six dimensions of social skills (the ability to influence others, to manage conflict, leadership, and ability to be a catalyst for change, to bond with others, to work collaboratively, to work as a team and to communicate effectively) and their relationship with empathy among gifted and talented students in Malaysia. Two hundred and forty (male = 81, female = 159) 15-year old gifted and talented students participated in the study. These students were identified as gifted and talented by the Malaysian National Gifted Centre and at present are studying at the centre as full time high school students. Data was collected using Malaysian Emotional Quotient Inventory (MEQI) developed by the researchers. A survey method was used and data was collected during a school holiday program that they have participated. Findings from the study show that all dimensions of social skills correlate positively with empathy ( $p < 0.00$ ,  $n = 240$ ) and the  $r$  values are more than 0.60. This article also discusses the findings in relation to counseling provision for the gifted and talented.

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### 1. Introduction

Gifted and talented students are commonly associated with unique psychological characters and emotional issues. They were also associated with social related issues in educational setting such as adjustment, isolation, and peers' acceptance (Yoo & Moon, 2006; Cross, Cassady, Dixon & Adams, 2008; Abu Yazid & Noriah, 2010). 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. Adams (1983) 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.

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In accordance with the Malaysian government effort to strengthen the dimensional growth of gifted and talented education, this study was conducted to evaluate the relationship of eight social skills dimensions namely 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 with empathy among local gifted and talented students. This study aims to evaluate the correlations between each dimension of social skills and empathy. The study will also discuss the implication of the findings towards the provision of counseling services for gifted and talented students' population.

## 2. Methodology

The study employed a survey method and data was collected using Malaysian Emotional Quotient Inventory (MEQI) developed by the researchers. The instrument measures 30 elements of emotional intelligence suggested by Goleman (1998). However, for the purpose of this article, only elements that involve social skills and empathy were considered. Elements of social 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 ( $\alpha = 0.890$ ). Empathy is measured by 35 items that looked into the abilities to understand others, help others, develop others potential, service others, leverage diversity, care for others, and have awareness towards political dynamics. The Cronbach alpha value for empathy is 0.923.

A total of 240 (male = 81, female = 159) gifted and talented students who attended a school holiday program organized by the Malaysian National Gifted Centre, also known as Pusat PERMATAPintar™ Negara participated in the study. The participants were middle school students (age = 15) who were identified as gifted and talented by the centre through two series of IQ test that they took from January 2010 until September 2010. Once selected, they were offered to participate in an enrichment program in STEM and Creative Writings.

## 3. Results

Data collected from the study were descriptively analyzed (Mean, SD) and Table 1 shows mean scores for all social skills dimensions and empathy. In general, the gifted and talented students participated in this study indicated middle to high possession of social 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 Social Skills 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 social 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 Dimensions of Social Skills and Empathy

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

\*\* significant at 0.01

#### 4. Discussion and Conclusion

Generally, all eight dimensions of social skills were found to be positively correlated with empathy, as being indicated by many established researchers (Eisenberg & Miller, 1987; Riggio, Tucker & Coffaro, 1989). 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 and talented 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 and talented students should focus on providing training in the skills that are not strongly correlated to their empathic understanding namely, the team capabilities and change catalyst.

In addition, the results show that the respondents have both good empathic understanding and good dimensional range of social skills. These findings seem to contradict with other studies which suggested that gifted and talented students generally faced problems in their social interactions, particularly within the learning environment (Neihart, 1999; Neihart, Reis, Robinson & Moon, 2002; Wood, 2010). 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 social skills among these students only occurred at the surface level. In order to develop an intimate relationship, gifted and talented 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 (Lempers & Lempers, 1992; Patterson, Field & Pryor, 1995; Noriah, Melor & I Piet, 2010). 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:

- a) understand the relational dynamics in order to help gifted and talented students overcome the bonding issue and establish meaningful relationship with their significant others,
- b) teach the gifted and talented students about the importance of bonding as a social support system,
- c) 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 and talented 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.

In summary, despite the common assumptions that gifted and talented students are a group of socially incompetent individuals, this study revealed that Malaysian gifted and talented students are relatively competent in their empathic 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.

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