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Author(s)	Thomas Skovholt & Vilma D'Rozario
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# **P**ortraits of Outstanding and Inadequate Teachers in Singapore: The Impact of Emotional Intelligence

Thomas Skovholt  
&  
Vilma D'Rozario

*Positive memories of teachers are reserved for particular and special people: the teacher who touched your heart, the teacher who cared about you as a person, the teacher whose passion for something—music, math, Latin, kites—was infectious and energizing.... Good teaching requires most of all a thoughtful, caring teacher committed to the lives of students.*

Ayers, 1993

What makes a teacher exceptional? Who are the good teachers? Who are the poor teachers? What makes them incompetent? The writers asked three samples of individuals to describe aspects of good and poor teaching using their own experiences as students. What the writers consistently found was that individuals described interpersonal and personal qualities—attributes currently labelled under the category of emotional intelligence (Goleman 1998) when they were asked to describe high and low quality teachers.

## **METHOD**

### **Study 1**

Student teachers at the National Institute of Education were asked to choose the teacher they *liked the most* and *liked the least* during all their years as a student. Then, they were asked to use two words to describe each of these teachers. Responses were collected from a sample of 120 student teachers. The sample was predominantly female and from primary education. The mean age was approximately 25.

To triangulate the data in a qualitative manner (Patton 1990), data was collected from two other groups.

## Study 2

In order to broaden the usefulness of *most liked* and *least liked* descriptions as measures of exceptional and poor teachers, an N = 51 group of Singapore junior college students was asked to provide two word descriptions of the *best* and *worst* teachers during all their years as a student. This group was about even in gender composition with a mean age of approximately 17.5 years.

## Study 3

In order to explore whether *most liked* and *least liked* criteria measured the quality of learning rather than popular/unpopular or 'easy'/'hard' teachers, 11 post-graduate students at NIE were asked to relate *how much they learned* from the *most liked* and *least liked* teachers in their own lives. The approximate mean age of this predominantly female group was 28. These same post-graduate students were also asked to provide paragraph-length descriptions of two constructs—'caring' and 'fierce'—which emerged in the Study 1 data.

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## RESULTS

### Study 1

Study 1 yielded a wide variety of both positive and negative teacher descriptions. There were 69 different words to describe the *most liked* teacher and 101 different words used to describe the *least liked* teacher. Overwhelmingly, the words chosen were descriptors of interpersonal and intrapersonal attributes. There was almost a total absence of words used to describe a highly educated, intellectually able, professionally trained and skilled person.

By far, the choice word for *most liked* teacher was 'caring', used 55 times. 'Fierce' was used most at 31 times to describe the *least liked* teacher. The top ten for both *most liked* and *least liked* are listed in Table 1.

Using standard qualitative methodology (Patton, 1990), the writers collectively grouped the descriptive words into **themes**. They did so by arranging and rearranging the descriptive terms to achieve coherent and meaningful thematic constructs. The process continued until they arrived at a consensus. All but nine of the terms were fitted into a theme.

Table 1

Top Ten Descriptions of <i>Most Liked</i> Teacher	Top Ten Descriptions of <i>Least Liked</i> Teacher
Caring Humorous Understanding Approachable Encouraging Interesting Kind Patient Concerned Friendly	Fierce Boring Sarcastic Unreasonable Strict Lazy Bad-tempered Biased Insensitive Irresponsible

### **'Most Liked Teacher' Themes**

#### ***Theme 1: Caring and Understanding (95 votes)***

'Caring' was the term used over and over again by the sample group to describe their most liked teacher. Also used were words such as 'understanding', 'kind', 'patient', 'concerned', 'helpful' and 'loving'. Here, it seems that the nominee felt an active connectedness to and warmth from their most liked teacher. The teacher characteristic of caring seemed of great importance to them.

#### ***Theme 2: Humorous and Engaging (37 votes)***

Words here included 'humorous', 'interesting', 'funny', 'fun' and 'cheerful'. Perhaps some of the most liked teachers, because of their style, made learning fun and interesting. This may be quite valuable to students as they avoid the boredom of academics while engaging in the learning process.

#### ***Theme 3: Approachable and Friendly (35 votes)***

Descriptions chosen were terms like 'approachable', 'friendly' and 'personable'. It may be that students, in their relatively vulnerable positions, very much appreciate the nice teacher who makes them feel safe and welcome.

**Theme 4: Encouraging and Motivating (22 votes)**

The terms used were 'encouraging', 'motivating', 'enthusiastic', and 'inspirational'. Since it often can be difficult for students to be motivated for school work, this teacher attribute may be treasured by many.

**Theme 5: Hardworking and dedicated (16 votes)**

The nominees selected words such as 'hardworking', 'dedicated', 'committed', 'responsible' and 'diligent'. They may have admired and appreciated teachers who gave so much of themselves in their work.

**'Least Liked Teacher' Themes****Theme 1: Hostile, Sarcastic and Impatient (133 votes)**

In comparison to all themes, this received the most votes. Thirty-eight different words, the most for any construct in this work, comprised the theme. They included 'fierce', 'sarcastic', 'unreasonable', 'strict', 'bad-tempered', 'critical', 'impatient', 'intimidating', 'irritating' and 'sadistic'. It appears the construct of clear irritability was very negatively perceived by the sample group when they recalled a least favourite teacher.

**Theme 2: Boring and Lazy (46 votes)**

This theme and the subsequent ones pale in comparison to the strength of Theme 1 above. Words here included 'boring', 'lazy', 'irresponsible', 'uninteresting' and 'unmotivated'. It appears that these words describe teacher behaviours and attitudes not respected by the sample group.

**Theme 3: Emotionally Cold (28 votes)**

The sample group used terms such as 'insensitive', 'unapproachable', 'cold', 'uncaring' and 'detached' for a constellation of teacher behaviours disliked by students. This is not the active hostility of the strongest negative theme. It does, however, reflect the absence of 'active caring and understanding', the strongest positive theme.

**Theme 4: Biased and Self-Absorbed (26 votes)**

The traits assembled here describe a dislikable person; that is, someone who has character traits usually thought of in a very negative way. Descriptors include 'biased', 'arrogant', 'unfair', 'favouritism', 'self-absorbed', 'artificial' and 'partial'.

**Theme 5: Incompetent as a Teacher (11 votes)**

This theme received the lowest number of votes of all themes, positive and negative. It also is the only one to focus on teaching methods or content knowledge, the two main focus areas of teacher education. Words within this theme included 'ineffective', 'disorganized' and 'ignorant'.

Most Liked Teacher Themes	Most Disliked Teacher Themes
1: Caring and Understanding (95 votes)	1: Hostile, Sarcastic, Impatient (133 votes)
2: Humorous and Engaging (37 votes)	2: Boring and Lazy (46 votes)
3: Approachable and Friendly (35 votes)	3: Emotionally Cold (28 votes)
4: Encouraging and Motivating (22 votes)	4: Biased and Self-Absorbed (26 votes)
5: Hardworking and Dedicated (16 votes)	5: Incompetent as a Teacher (11 votes)

**Study 2**

The intention of Study 2 was to further explore the meanings given to the terms 'most liked' and 'least liked' by the sample group in Study 1. Here, the terms used are *best* and *worst*. Examination of the results reveals a consistency with Study 1. The words chosen, as in Study 1, describe interpersonal attributes and intrapersonal characteristics. The five most popular *best* words were 'caring', 'friendly', 'approachable', 'helpful' and 'understanding'. The five most popular *worst* words were 'biased', 'irresponsible', 'sarcastic', 'unreasonable' and 'uncaring'. The words of Study 2, if categorized as themes, would generally correspond to the theme order of Study 1 with the first themes identical and subsequent themes only varying somewhat in their order.

**Study 3**

This sample group provided two sources of information. Firstly, the members rated how much they learned from the *most liked* and *least liked* teacher in their lives. Since the goal of formal education is learning, it seemed important to get a direct indicator of this factor. A seven-point scale was used, with 7 = extremely high amount (of learning), 6 = very

much, 5 = much, 4 = some, 3 = little, 2 = very little and 1 = almost nothing. The mean for *most liked* was 5.5, or between 'much' and 'very much'. The mean for *least liked* was 3.5, or between 'little' or 'some'. Secondly, the group was asked to write paragraph-length descriptions of a 'caring teacher' and a 'fierce teacher', 'caring' and 'fierce' being the two top words of Study 1. Composite portraits of these descriptions are:

### ***Portrait of 'Caring Teacher'***

A 'caring teacher' relates to each student as a separate person, who is respected. Students feel personal interest and concern from the teacher. The teacher listens, encourages and motivates the students. The teacher can be trusted, and is fair and honest. Students want to be with the teacher.

### ***Portrait of 'Fierce Teacher'***

A 'fierce teacher' regularly scolds, punishes, demands, threatens as a way to relate to students. The teacher often attempts to instil fear in students. Students do not feel that such a teacher is sensitive to their individual needs or respects them as separate persons. Students do not feel safe in the presence of the teacher.

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## **DISCUSSION**

The results of this study are consistent. When individuals are asked to describe high and low quality teachers, they consistently describe interpersonal and personal qualities—attributes currently placed under the category of emotional intelligence (Goleman 1998). Another category system of relevance here is that of multiple intelligences (Gardner 1993). However, it is stunning to think how these results are outside popular discourse on the development of human capital. Over and over again, the educational systems of the developed world are saturated with a focus on test/ exam scores, which measure the most conventional kinds of intelligence. This usually means verbal and quantitative capacities. Yet, in the study described here, there is a noticeable lack of these most conventional ideas of educational success. In addition, there is almost no mention of the curriculum of teacher education—that is, the methods of teaching.

What is the lesson of this study? This is an important question as the optimal education development of the citizens of a country is

growing, and growing in importance in the global marketplace of useful information and competitive ideas. And teachers live occupationally at centre stage in this drama.

The writers turn to a number of different perspectives on this question. Reviewing the research related to emotional intelligence, Goleman (1998) provides support for the results of this study. He said, "...findings on the importance of emotional competence fit a general pattern revealed in other empirical studies of on-the-job excellence. The data comes from a multitude of sources. All suggest that, in general, emotional competencies play a far larger role in superior job performance than do cognitive abilities and technical expertise" (p.320).

Goleman suggests that standard school learning provides a threshold for later job performance and that I.Q. accounts for only 4% to 25% of achievement. This threshold level idea could help explain why there seems to be so little correlation between test/ exam scores and achievement; in measurement terms, it is difficult to have high correlations with a restricted range on one of the variables. For example, Goleman cites a study which found no correlations between entrance exam scores and later career success for Harvard graduates in law, medicine, teaching and business (Goleman 1998:19).

Perhaps the threshold effect is operating with the selection of outstanding teachers, whether they are considered most liked or best. Such teachers may be intellectually talented and highly skilled at teaching. In addition they have outstanding 'people skills'. The result is a portrait of exceptional talent.

A similar portrait emerged in a U.S. study of psychotherapists. This occupation is important to study because such professionals function at the most intense level of human interaction. In a recently completed study of master therapists, three major domains of functioning emerged. It was found that these master therapists were exceptional within the cognitive domain of cognitive complexity and creativity; the emotional domain of self-understanding and emotional maturity; and the relational domain of empathy and understanding of others (Jennings & Skovholt 1999). It seems reasonable to think that exceptionally good teachers can be described in a similar fashion.

The outcome research in counselling and psychotherapy usually concerns the quality of the interpersonal relationship between helper and client. Sexton & Whitson (1994) summarize: "The quality of the

counselling relationship has consistently been found to have the most significant impact on successful client outcome" (p.6). This focus seems in tune with the one word chosen most by both Study 1 and Study 2 sample groups to describe exceptional teachers. That word is 'caring'.

With regard to 'caring', there is another body of relevant research. Studying children who have grown up in highly stressful environments, researchers have made a surprising discovery. They have found that such children thrive, instead of wither, and have been labelled resilient or invulnerable (Garmezy 1993). One factor in the lives of these children is "...a person outside the immediate family—perhaps a grandparent, teacher, or close friend—who forms a special relationship with the child...an understanding adult can increase the young person's chances of developing effective coping skills" (Beck 1997:9). This line of research reinforces the positive teacher factors we have found. This is especially true for the factors within the theme of 'caring and understanding'.

It is important to also discuss the results related to the *least liked* and *worst* categories. Here, very negative descriptions were used to describe actual teachers in the lives of the research participants. They were not describing hypothetically incompetent teachers, but real teachers. The strongest theme of all themes—both positive and negative ones—concerned a construct of 'active hostility'. It is clear from child psychology literature (Beck 1997) and educational psychology literature (Woolfolk 1995) that an adult atmosphere of active hostility is like emotional carbon-dioxide for students. The words used ('fierce', 'sarcastic', 'unreasonable', 'bad-tempered', 'critical', 'impatient', 'intimidating', 'irritating' and 'sadistic') paint a troubling picture. It implies and suggests active intervention by those who supervise teachers.

Finally, the writers applaud the timeliness of current efforts being made in Singapore regarding goals of formal education. In a publication entitled *Desired Outcomes of Education* (1998), a variety of educational outcomes for primary, secondary, junior college and tertiary education are stated which highlight the importance of Emotional Intelligence and also fit within the broad scope of multiple intelligence.

Thomas Skovholt is a Professor of Counselling Psychology at the University of Minnesota, USA. He has published widely in the area of counsellor professional development and is well-respected, both as a practitioner as well as an academic, in the field of counselling psychology.

Vilma D'Rozario is an Associate Professor in the Division of Psychological Studies at the National Institute of Education, Nanyang Technological University. She teaches courses in guidance and counselling, as well as in child and adolescent psychology.

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