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Implicit Assumptions of (Prospective) Music School Teachers About Musically Gifted Students

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Abstract

Stereotypical assumptions associating high giftedness with maladaptive behaviors and personality (disharmony stereotype) are rather prevalent in school and music domains and might affect teachers' evaluations of students and curricular decisions. Using a controlled vignette approach with $N=211$ (prospective) German music schoolteachers, we investigated how background information, combined with a manipulated music recording, affected teachers' assessment of a fictive student's performance, behaviors, and personality and the curricular decisions they made. Experimental variations included the student's supposed giftedness level, social interaction, age, and training duration. Our results contradict the disharmony stereotype but align with the harmony theory, since highly gifted students were rated similarly to or more positive than averagely gifted students. Teachers' curricular decisions were not influenced by the background information.

Zusammenfassung

Existing research literature distinguishes between two conflicting theories of stereotypical assumptions regarding giftedness: the harmony theory (assumptions of superiority through giftedness; e.g., Persson, 1998) and the disharmony theory (assumptions of vulnerability through giftedness; e.g., Gallagher, 1990; Neihart, 1999; Preckel & Vock, 2021). To date, there have been mixed results concerning the appropriateness of both theories: Whereas the findings of implicit experimental studies have revealed the prevalence of the disharmony stereotype as a mental representation of (prospective) teachers in the school context and in the musical domain (e.g., Baudson & Preckel, 2013, 2016; Gnas et al., 2020; Matheis et al., 2017, 2020), numerous studies have refuted the disharmony stereotype and support the harmony theory instead (e.g., Costa-Giomi, 2015; DeYoung et al., 2014; Freund-Braier, 2009; Wirthwein et al., 2019; Zeidner & Shani-Zinovich, 2011).

Our experimental study investigated the implicit assumptions of $N=211$ (prospective) music schoolteachers about allegedly musically gifted students. The $2 \times 2 \times 2$ factorial between-subjects design was conducted, resulting in 16 conditions that were realized by a vignette approach, whereby participants randomly received one of 16 vignettes. We added a controlled manipulation of a fictive music performance to the narrative part of the vignette to provide further information about the proficiency level of the fictive student within the vignette. Independent variables were the fictive students' level of giftedness (musically gifted or average), age (8 or 15 years), training duration (two or four years of instrumental lessons), and social interaction (positive or negative). Behavioral characteristics (*assumptions about gifted persons*; Preckel & Matheis, 2017), personality traits (*Five Factor Questionnaire for Children*; Asendorpf, 1998), and curricular decisions (piano piece selection) served as dependent variables, with participants' teaching experience acting as the covariate.

Results of multivariate analyses of covariance and follow-up univariate posthoc tests indicated that teachers' preconceptions of allegedly highly gifted students were a high level of intellectual and musical abilities with behavioral characteristics and personality traits rated at least equivalent to those of allegedly averagely gifted students. Thus, the results align with the harmony stereotype. Background information about the fictive students' social interaction had no moderating impact on these findings. Results of chi-squared tests and log-linear analyses indicated that teachers' curricular decisions were not influenced by background information.

Drawing on the dynamics of self-fulfilling prophecies (Merton, 1948), teachers' expectations and stereotypical attitudes can significantly influence students' behavior, performance, and development (Davidson et al., 1998; Gagné, 2009; Gagné & McPherson, 2016). Especially, the existence of the harmony stereotype might place students under pressure and make them feel they cannot live up to expectations (Baudson & Preckel, 2016). According to the stigma of giftedness theory (Coleman & Cross, 1988; Cross, 2005), students may be worried about being excluded because of their giftedness, resulting in dysfunctional behaviors. Training programs provided in initial and continuing teacher education can make a targeted contribution to raising awareness and counteracting stereotypical assumptions in the long term (cf. Gnas et al., 2020).

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