A Lack of Awareness and Emphasis in Preservice Teacher Training: Preconceived Beliefs About the Gifted and Talented
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What is This?
A Lack of Awareness and Emphasis in Preservice Teacher Training
Preconceived Beliefs About the Gifted and Talented
Kimberly M. Berman, MEd1, Robert A. Schultz, PhD1, and Christine L. Weber, PhD2

Abstract: Gifted and talented (GT) learners in most classroom settings endure unchallenging curriculum, a slow pace of instruction, and a state of ignorance by many of their general education teachers. The authors wanted to know how in-service teachers, preservice teacher candidates, and preservice education students viewed GT learners. The authors also wanted to know how their respondents felt about teacher training specific to the nature and needs of GT learners. Information was gathered via pre/postcourse questionnaires to describe existing beliefs and assumptions that individuals in various phases of teacher development held regarding GT learners. Findings suggest that the preconceived beliefs held by individuals about GT learners guide the willingness and approaches used to teach children more so than specific training in the nature/needs of learners.

Keywords: gifted and talented education, teacher training, teacher beliefs

Gifted and talented (GT) learners in most classroom settings tend to endure unchallenging curriculum, a slow pace of instruction, and a state of ignorance by many of their general education teachers. These are harsh words, yes—but in the current educational (financial) crisis, we have to start being very clear about the nature and needs of GT learners. Our advocacy efforts demand no less.

Every time I come to class, I learn that what I have been doing to keep my GT kids busy might actually be keeping them from learning at a level and pace they need. Why didn’t I learn about this in my teacher education program? (Master’s degree level student, 2010)

I never really spent much time thinking about what happens in the mind of a GT kid who is bored. I thought as the teacher, my responsibility was to keep everyone moving along at a common pace. I know the “slow kids” need more of my time, but I never realized the “fast kids” are just sitting there doing nothing. I don’t know why this has never dawned on me before?! (Master’s degree level student, 2009)

The above quotations come directly from in-service teachers working toward master’s degrees in curriculum and instruction. These teachers take part in a graduate level experience aimed at providing awareness training for general educators regarding the nature and needs of GT learners. The samples are representative of more than 100 individual comments that are shared through “minute writes” at the end of each weekly class meeting. They show that licensed general educators have very little awareness, and are just beginning to realize, that GT students have unique needs in their classroom settings.

Addressing the lack of awareness begins with gathering descriptive accounts of what preservice teacher candidates believe and assume about GT learners. Having the anecdotal accounts from more than a hundred individual licensed general educators who self-selected a course in gifted education as part of their master’s degree work, it seems painfully obvious that the vast majority of general educators have little (if any) insight about the needs of GT learners in their classrooms. In addition, one step further delimits a need to begin exploring teacher education practices to document where (or if) awareness training about the nature and needs of GT learners is presented in the preparation experience.

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This article presents findings related to work being done in an undergraduate teacher education program in the Midwest where a requirement is in place for a course on the nature and needs of gifted learners. The results presented reflect 2 years worth of data collected from preservice teacher candidates. The data collection and study is ongoing, and it is our hope that readers begin reflecting on teacher education and preparation in their own locales while looking into our “kitchen” as we undergo the process of capturing a descriptive account of our actions and revise in situ.

Teacher Training in Gifted Education: Broad Focus

Gifted students need specialized teachers to help them better understand their abilities, to deal with personal and social challenges, and to set appropriate goals (J. F. Feldhusen, 1995). In response to this assessment and the general focus on teacher training on a national scale (e.g., Cochran-Smith & Zeichner, 2007; Darling-Hammond, 1997; Darling-Hammond & Bransford, 2005; Stronge, Tucker, & Hindman, 2004), the Council for Exceptional Children (CEC), The Association for the Gifted, and the National Association for Gifted Children (NAGC) created teacher preparation standards for gifted education in Pre-K to Grade-12 settings in 2006. These standards include knowledge and skills necessary for educators to effectively teach GT children in classroom settings (NAGC/CEC, 2006).

A key expectation is that preservice teacher candidates would be trained according to the NAGC/CEC teacher preparation standards before entering classrooms with identified GT learners (Johnsen, VanTassel-Baska, & Robinson, 2008). Unfortunately, this expectation remains more of an assumption than a reality in the present moment of general teacher education.

GT Learner Needs

Gifted children deserve services based on their unique psychological and pedagogical needs (H. Feldhusen, 1981; Tomlinson et al., 2005). A classroom for gifted students provides a space for their needs to be met with more challenging and rewarding work. In an appropriate setting, GT students experience a curriculum modified in pace, breadth, and expected outcomes.

GT students should be given an opportunity to experience independence, self-direction, and self-discipline in their learning (H. Feldhusen, 1981). Pacing, degree of challenge, and focus on passion are some needs of gifted learners to be considered when developing curriculum and classroom practices (Tomlinson, 2005).

Teacher Training in Gifted Education: Reality Check

J. F. Feldhusen (1997) found that characteristics of effective teachers of the gifted tended to mirror the characteristics of GT learners. In effect, a match in tendencies and behaviors seems to enhance the teaching/learning process. However, a reasonable argument is that the percentages work against the GT—as students and teachers. If the GT comprise approximately 3% of the general population, this ratio would be likely to exist in teacher education programs as well. By sheer volume, the alignment between teachers and GT students sharing tendencies and behaviors is a rare situation. With specific training about the definitions of giftedness, selection criteria, the role of intelligence tests, and characteristics of gifted children, all teachers can be twice as effective in identifying gifted children (Gear, 1978). This might not necessarily translate to effective teaching of GT learners, but the awareness of differences and needs is an important first step.

There are significant differences between teachers with specialized training in gifted education and those without training (Hanninan, 1988; Hultgren & Seeley, 1982; Maker, 1975). GT trained teachers are more energetic with students and are enthusiastic about the myriad differences individual learners bring to the classroom setting (Croft, 2003; J. F. Feldhusen, 1997; Graffam, 2006; Hansen & Feldhusen, 1994; Mills, 2003; Story, 1985). However, McCoach and Siegle (2007) found that gifted education training does not consistently show an impact on teachers’ attitudes toward the gifted. The authors claim that teachers’ perceptions of themselves as gifted were positively related to their attitudes about GT learners. However, these self-perceptions have little to do with the ways and means used in classrooms to address student nature and needs.

Purpose of This Study

We wanted to know how in-service teachers, preservice teacher candidates (those students with at least two semesters of methods courses and field experiences), and preservice education students (those students early in their teacher education programs, with less than two semesters of methods courses and field experiences) viewed GT learners. We also wanted to know how and what our respondents felt about teacher training specific to the nature and needs of GT learners. Specifically, the following questions set the stage for our study: Does training in gifted education increase teachers’ perceptions of themselves as gifted? Does this newfound perception affect the willingness of teacher candidates to differentiate the curriculum to meet the needs of GT learners? What are some of the beliefs preservice teacher candidates hold about GT learners?

Data Collection

Information was gathered to examine and describe some of the existing beliefs and assumptions that individuals who are in various phases of teacher professional development hold regarding the GT. The data were primarily qualitative in nature and were not representative of the broad population of teacher education students, candidates, or in-service practitioners.
**Table 1. Pre/Postsurvey Questionnaire**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Response</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Have you had any coursework or experiences working with gifted and talented children? Explain.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Have you been identified as gifted and talented? If so, how did you find this out?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>When someone talks about a gifted and talented learner, what does this mean to you?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Give me five characteristics of a gifted and talented child.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do you think it is important for gifted and talented students to have teachers trained in the nature/needs of the gifted and talented? Explain.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What do you think would be the best part of working with gifted and talented learners?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What do you think would be the most difficult part of working with gifted and talented learners?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Is there anything you believe about the gifted and talented I should have asked but didn’t in this survey?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Description of Respondents and Procedure**

This pool of respondents comprised undergraduate students who were taking a semester-long course, “Teaching Young Gifted and Talented Learners,” taught by Dr. Schultz and in their 2nd year of teacher education. They were enrolled concurrently in the first or second methods course and teaching field experience in general education. All preservice teacher candidates had either three or four semester-long methods courses and teaching field experiences in general education prior to Dr. Schultz's course. The respondent groups described in this article were students from the first two courses taught after development of the questionnaire.

Respondents were surveyed (pre-post open-ended questions) about their assumptions and beliefs regarding GT children they might encounter as active classroom teachers when they completed their teacher education programs using the questionnaire designed for this study (see Tables 2 and 3). Dr. Schultz had used the pre/post survey in this course for 2 years ($n_1 = 28; n_2 = 27$). Data from both courses were pooled for use in this article. Data reduction was performed and the three most prevalent themes were noted for responses to each question based on the pooled data set (see Tables 2 and 3).

**Analysis**

**Primary Analysis**

The pooled data were analyzed via a “clumping” method for each question response. The goal was to generate a set of themes that broadly represented descriptive accounts of the respondents. In some cases (Question 2, for example), initial clumping led to two categories (Yes/No). The second parse focused on “Yes” responses, separating into two “How did you find out” clumps—family member notification and educator notification. In other cases, the open-ended nature of the questions caused a myriad of themes to emerge (Question 8, for example). Because the focus of the study was broad descriptive representation of the data, we chose to highlight frequency of responses rather than exhaustive accounts of each respondent.

**Secondary Analysis**

Once we had the context of broad descriptive accounts, we revisited individual responses to provide individual vignettes that added depth to the primary themes. This secondary analysis was done to provide evidence of the deep emotions many respondents displayed in their responses and to provide readers with a clearer view of how respondents felt after having a professional experience—a course—that introduced them to a subpopulation of learners previously unknown or unaddressed in their teacher training programs.

**Discussion**

The data do present findings that align with many of the myths and prevailing perceptions associated with giftedness.
in the literature (Bain, Bliss, Choate, & Sager Brown, 2007; Callahan, 2009; Hertberg-Davis, 2009; Kaplan, 2009; Reis & Renzulli, 2009; Worrell, 2009). This information also represents some of the assumptions, biases, and beliefs that affect teachers and teacher candidates regarding the perceived need for specialized training associated with GT learners.

Life experience seemed to be the largest contributing factor to the preconceived notions about giftedness displayed by participants in our ongoing study. Some had experiences working with bright learners or had a family member who had been identified as GT. In all cases, the personalized definition of giftedness related to classroom practices was scaffolded by beliefs that (a) everyone is gifted at something or in some area or (b) they don’t need special services because they will “get it” on their own. These two results match well with the myths of giftedness that exist in the literature (Cooper, 2009; Moon, 2009; Peterson, 2009).

In our work, these preconceived notions remain stubbornly intact even after a semester-long experience specific to educating GT learners. The postsurvey responses did show

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Survey question</th>
<th>Rank 1 response</th>
<th>Rank 2 response</th>
<th>Rank 3 response</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Have you had any coursework or experiences working with GT children? Explain.</td>
<td>Worked with bright kids at camp or tutoring. $(n = 32)$</td>
<td>No. $(n = 17)$</td>
<td>A family member is GT. $(n = 6)$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Have you been identified as GT? If so, how did you find this out?</td>
<td>No. $(n = 34)$</td>
<td>Yes. An adult family member (parent, grandparent) told me I was gifted at something (varies). $(n = 16)$</td>
<td>Yes. An educator (teacher, coach, counselor) told me I was talented and should pursue this area in my future. $(n = 5)$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>When someone talks about a GT learner, what does this mean to you?</td>
<td>Someone good at an academic area that gets good grades. $(n = 26)$</td>
<td>A student who reads quickly and needs to have extra work to do to keep busy. $(n = 17)$</td>
<td>A group leader in the classroom who can help the slower kids catch up. $(n = 9)$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Give me five (5) characteristics of a GT child.</td>
<td>Gets good grades. $(n = 30)$</td>
<td>A good reader. $(n = 11)$</td>
<td>Completes all tasks and homework all the time. $(n = 10)$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do you think it is important for GT students to have teachers trained in the nature/needs of the GT? Explain.</td>
<td>No. All kids are gifted or talented at something. $(n = 24)$</td>
<td>No. We need to focus on helping the struggling kids. $(n = 23)$</td>
<td>No. They’ll get it on their own. $(n = 6)$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What do you think would be the best part of working with GT learners?</td>
<td>They do the work assigned without causing trouble. $(n = 38)$</td>
<td>They are motivated to learn. $(n = 12)$</td>
<td>They would be easy to work with because they are smart. $(n = 3)$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What do you think would be the most difficult part of working with GT learners?</td>
<td>Nothing. $(n = 38)$</td>
<td>They read too much and wouldn’t want to play much. $(n = 7)$</td>
<td>Their parents expect too much from them and me as the teacher. $(n = 6)$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Is there anything you believe about the GT I should have asked but didn’t in this survey?</td>
<td>They should not get to do special things; it’s not fair to other kids. $(n = 17)$</td>
<td>Everyone is gifted or talented at something. $(n = 16)$</td>
<td>They get it on their own. Why is this class required? $(n = 14)$</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note. GT = gifted and talented.*
Table 3. Preservice Student Postcourse Survey Composite (N = 55)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Survey question</th>
<th>Rank 1 response</th>
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<th>Rank 3 response</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Have you had any coursework or experiences working with GT children? Explain.</td>
<td>Worked with bright kids at camp or tutoring. (n = 31)</td>
<td>No. (n = 17)</td>
<td>A family member is GT. (n = 6)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Have you been identified as GT? If so, how did you find this out?</td>
<td>No. (n = 34)</td>
<td>Yes. An adult family member (parent, grandparent) told me I was gifted at something (varies). (n = 16)</td>
<td>Yes. An educator (teacher, coach, counselor) told me I was talented and should pursue this area in my future. (n = 5)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>When someone talks about a GT learner, what does this mean to you?</td>
<td>A student needing my attention as a teacher to keep them on track and not disrupting others. (n = 18)</td>
<td>A student who is probably bored in my class. (n = 17)</td>
<td>A student who hasn’t had much chance to really enjoy learning. (n = 11)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Give me five (5) characteristics of a GT child.</td>
<td>Quick learner. (n = 40)</td>
<td>Needs acceleration in content area or a whole grade. (n = 11)</td>
<td>A bored child who I need to help with interesting and challenging experiences. (n = 3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do you think it is important for GT students to have teachers trained in the nature/needs of the GT? Explain.</td>
<td>Yes. They need a teacher who can get work at the level they need. (n = 22)</td>
<td>Yes. So the teacher can best meet the child’s needs. (n = 11)</td>
<td>Yes. So the student won’t be bored. (n = 10)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What do you think would be the best part of working with GT learners?</td>
<td>They can help other kids learn in the classroom. (n = 27)</td>
<td>They can soar and get very excited about learning. (n = 13)</td>
<td>They are easier to work with than SPED students. (n = 11)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What do you think would be the most difficult part of working with GT learners?</td>
<td>If they know more than me. (n = 34)</td>
<td>Keeping them challenged while I’m trying to teach the other kids. (n = 13)</td>
<td>Keeping them from disrupting other kids when they finish work quickly. (n = 3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Is there anything you believe about the GT I should have asked but didn’t in this survey?</td>
<td>How do I prepare lessons for GT kids and all the others too? (n = 16)</td>
<td>How to help GT kids learn how to study? (n = 8)</td>
<td>Why don’t schools do more for the GT kids? (n = 6)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. GT = gifted and talented.

changes in response to the question asking directly about specialized teacher training for GT learners. But, looking holistically across all question responses, participants overwhelmingly displayed beliefs that gifted learners would be more of a problem in classroom settings than a blessing (other than being able to serve as peer tutors!). Respondents did become more aware of some of the nature and needs of GT learners over the duration of the course on educating GT learners, but became concerned about the workload necessary to deal with GT children in their classrooms. Most felt doing something specific for the GT learners in their charge was a major imposition on their time and felt this was unfair. For example,

How am I supposed to be able to prepare advanced lessons for the bright children in my class along with the required content and also meet the needs of the kids who are behind? I know we learned about how the bright kids need to be challenged, but they are already ahead. (Year 2 middle childhood cohort, female)
We have special educators for the SPED students. Why not specialists for the GT kids, too? My job is to move the class forward based on the standards. The fringe kids should not be my concern as a regular educator. (Year 2 middle childhood cohort, male)

I would not have gone into teaching if I would have known earlier that it would be this much work! (Year 1 middle childhood cohort, female)

It's frustrating that we teachers are expected by you to do so much for kids that are already ahead of the curve. How is this fair to me or the SPED kids who need my assistance to just be able to keep up? (Year 1 SPED cohort, female)

Perceptions about GT learners were difficult to tease out. We asked very direct questions but received varying depth of responses from respondents. In our representation of the data in the pre/post tables, the data seem relatively clear. Yet, our experience was anything but that. We continuously struggled to engage preservice teacher education students in reflective practices (Schön, 1983) related to the nature and needs of GT learners.

Most respondents were seemingly unwilling or unable to realize they held entrenched beliefs about GT learners that colored the approach they were likely to use working in these children's classrooms. One respondent was brave enough to even challenge our approach:

Teaching is about getting the content across to the students and meeting the standards. We've learned that in every class up to this point. You want us to think about this and possibly go against the grain to meet individual kids' specific needs. How does that help us get jobs? (Year 1 middle childhood cohort, male)

We suspect that the struggle we faced trying to tease out beliefs associated with GT learners would also have been faced dealing with any exceptional population of learners. It seems apparent that respondents view the preservice teacher education program as a production line of disparate experiences. The goal is to follow along a prescribed path of courses to a credential, ticking off requirements along the way. This assembly line approach does not seem to enable most preservice teaching candidates to identify their biases and beliefs about teaching varied ability learners—specifically GT children.

Conclusions

The Higher Education Opportunity Act (Pub. L. 110–315, 2008) requires that teacher candidates have skills and an understanding about effective instructional strategies to “meet the specific learning needs of all students . . . including students who are gifted and talented” (§ 2, 122 Stat. 3133). This reauthorization also states that teachers must focus on identifying students’ specific learning needs, including GT learners. It is not enough to know about GT learners. Teachers must also identify GT learner needs and be able to skillfully implement instructional strategies to meet these needs.

In this study, our focus was on describing and gaining an understanding about the perceptions, beliefs, and assumptions that preservice teacher candidates had regarding GT learners. It was apparent from the data gathered during this ongoing project that preservice teacher education students lack an understanding about the nature and needs of GT learners.

Based on the experiences we have had related to this project, one course focusing on the nature and needs of GT learners in a general teacher education program is woefully lacking in providing awareness about the nature and needs of GT learners in classroom settings. Our preservice students were just beginning to gain a critical perspective about their own beliefs when our course experience together ended. We were able to engage in only a very cursory overview of the nature and needs of GT learners.

It seems painfully obvious; the embodiment of PL 110–315 is lacking in preservice teacher candidates. At the outset of the course, preservice students lacked almost total awareness that GT students even had needs in educational settings. At the conclusion of the experience, many of our preservice students were just beginning to realize that GT learners required attention in their classrooms. Indeed, this forming awareness left our preservice candidates frustrated that their career path toward teaching would demand work based on their students' needs—which, surprisingly, they had not fathomed to this point in their professional development.

Gifted child education currently lacks space and place in the general teacher education curriculum, even though federal law mandates teachers are competent and skilled in identifying and providing instructional strategies to service the needs of GT learners. For many teacher candidates, the GT children in their classrooms are viewed as nothing more than peer-tutoring candidates who are ahead of the game. They are not viewed as children being handicapped by an unchallenging educational environment or a lack of awareness by those charged with keeping students' best interests in mind—their teachers.

There are many factors that contribute to the generalizations noted herein, not the least of which include federal legislation supporting the needs of students in meeting standards (see the No Child Left Behind Act, 2001, available at http://www2.ed.gov/policy/elsec/leg/esea02/index.html), which, for all intents and purposes, are minimum levels of performance. This focus disregards the gifted student who has already exceeded the baseline—very likely a year or more before her or his age peers. In addition, most teacher educators have limited to no awareness training in the nature and needs of GT learners.

Our work points out that teacher education programs must include coursework and experiences focusing on the nature and needs of GT learners if we expect to meet these learners' needs in common classroom settings. Indeed, federal law mandates it. The expectation that general educators can differentiate curriculum without specific training to meet the
needs of GT learners is a pipe dream. Many, as supported by our work thus far, do not have even a cursory awareness of the nature and needs of GT learners—and hold perceptions and beliefs about the gifted that limit their willingness to recognize a need for something other than standard curriculum or peer tutoring to help the slower students.

This might be another contentious generalization, but we do not believe it is off target. We are continuing our efforts to gather descriptive information and begin a focus on reflective practice in general teacher education programs regarding the nature and needs of the GT. The next steps will include development and implementation of experiences teaching instructional strategies appropriate for GT learners.

We invite you to become involved in our efforts, or begin your own gathering of information. We are very confident that additional scholarly and empirical work is very likely to support our findings and contentions—and will contribute greatly to the limited knowledge base existing in the literature.

Conflict of Interest

The author(s) declare no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the authorship and/or publication of this article.

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Bios

Kimberly M. Berman, MEd, is a gifted intervention and reading specialist for Findlay City Schools. She teaches and progress monitors reading for all students in a kindergarten through second grade school. She also works as the lead administrative teacher. Kim administrates summer camps for gifted children at the University of Toledo. She is a member of Golden Key and Kappa Delta Pi International Honor Societies and is a PhD candidate in curriculum and instruction, gifted and talented at the University of Toledo.

Robert A. Schultz, PhD, is professor of gifted education and curriculum studies at the University of Toledo. He is the past chair of the Conceptual Foundations Network of the National Association for Gifted Children (NAGC) and serves as a Young Scholars Specialist for the Davidson Institute as well as a contributing editor to Roeper Review and Gifted Child Today. Bob coauthored (with Jim Delisle), Smart Talk and More Than a Test Score and is working on three additional books on giftedness and curriculum for gifted learners (and their teachers).

Christine L. Weber, PhD, is an associate professor of childhood education at the University of North Florida. Her research interests include extensive work in gifted education as well as the development of the Florida’s Frameworks for K-12 Gifted Learners. She was the principal investigator for the Working on Gifted Issues Project, a grant project funded by the Florida Department of Education for the past eight years.