A Need to Rethink about National Consensus on Preparing Teachers of the Gifted: A Policy Brief

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Executive Summary

One of the most important issues facing gifted education today is teacher preparation. This issue is important for several reasons. The majority of gifted students spend most of their time in regular classrooms and many school districts are not able to provide any supplemental services for them. In the last few decades, there has been a greater emphasis on identifying characteristics that help to define the so-called "teacher of the gifted." Research strongly suggests that teachers of the gifted must have pedagogical skills and knowledge to provide at least some of the services. Only a very small number of states have policies that mandate teachers to have a certificate for teaching gifted students. In many states, it is up to local educational agencies to determine if there is a need for such requirement. The issue is becoming increasingly prominent due to the lack of mandated initiatives.

Introduction

"A schism is discussed between those who believe that teaching is a profession like law or medicine, requiring a substantial amount of education before one becomes a practitioner, and those who think teaching is a craft which is learned principally on the job" writes Arthur Levine in his executive summary of Educating School Teachers (2006, p.1). Although contextual complexity in teacher preparation exists, I argue that both college education and experience in school settings are essential elements for becoming an effective teacher. Critical to this preparation is improving teacher education programs at the college level to ensure students receive the quality education they deserve.

Teacher preparation has been at the forefront of educational reform over the past few decades, and the issue remains one of the key issues in school reform policy. Recently, as a part of the Obama Administration's plan for improving teacher recruitment and preparation, the U.S. Department of Education (2011) announced its strategy to improve the quality of teacher education programs and remove burdensome regulations. This plan is a valuable roadmap for effective program improvement in teacher education.

The subfield of gifted education is struggling with similar issues that general school reform policy faces. Teacher preparation is one of them. However, the issues facing gifted education become more challenging due to a lack of mandated initiatives in the field. Each state has its own legislation and accountability system for gifted education. A broad range of policies and legislation make national reform in gifted education more difficult and less inclusive (Brown, Avery, VanTassel-Baska, Worley, & Stambaugh, 2006). Reaching consensus on gifted education policy mandates is unlikely in the near feature. Unless current efforts on development of gifted education policy are shifted from a few isolated initiatives that focus solely on identifying gifted students and presenting limited program features, change and reform is unlikely (Shaunessy, 2003).

Approaches and Results

The literature emphasizes the importance of preparing teachers to educate gifted students. Some studies directly address pre-service preparation in gifted education (Rogers, 1989; Shore, Cornell, Robinson, & Ward, 1991), while other studies seem to focus on understanding teachers of gifted learners (Bishop, 1968; Howley, Howley, & Pendarvis, 1986; Mills, 2003; Roberts, 2006; Sanders & Rivers, 1996). Sanders and Rivers (1996) reported that ineffective teachers had a diminishing effect on gifted students' achievement. Effective teachers of the gifted have characteristics (e.g., tolerance for ambiguity, creativity, and interest in literature and cultural matters) similar to those also ascribed to gifted students (Howley, Howley, & Pendarvis, 1986). Bishop's (1968) study of 200 teachers of gifted students, found that a group of exemplary teachers have higher achievement needs, greater

literary and cultural interests, and systematic, orderly, enthusiasm about their subject matters.

Classroom teachers are the primary agent for identifying and serving gifted students in schools. Therefore, regular classroom teachers, too, should have the requisite skill and preparation to address the needs of gifted students. If the gifted students' needs are not met in these settings, they may lose their interest and become bored with school. A survey of 871 gifted students in North Carolina revealed that students were bored by the pace and nature of the instruction they received in public school programs (Gallagher, Harradine, & Coleman, 1997). Thus, teachers needs to understand both academic and affective needs of gifted students in order for these students to reach their potential (Colangelo, 1991; Greenlaw & McIntosh, 1988).

There is no certification or degree requirement for teachers of gifted students at the national level. Only a small number of states have requirements regarding pre-service endorsement coursework and in-service training after initial certification. The National Association for Gifted Children (NAGC, 2013) reported that only one state, Kentucky, has a regulation for all pre-service teachers to receive gifted coursework. In many states, there are no state policies regarding in-service training. In 15 states, state policy leaves up to local educational agencies determine if general educational teachers must receive gifted in-service training. As a result, requirements or recommendations for completion of coursework and ongoing professional development vary widely from state to state and in many cases from district to district within a given state.

The broad disparity in teacher training and professional development across states is a significant problem in the field. In order to address this issue, the NAGC and Council for Exceptional Children (CEC, 2006) collaborated over three years to develop a set of research-based standards for educators: The Teacher Knowledge and Skills Standards for Gifted and Talented. The standards enumerate the pedagogical skills and knowledge about gifted learner development with which teachers of gifted learners should align. The standards were approved as national official standards to guide state departments of public instructions in developing standards for teachers of K-12 gifted children and to assist college and universities in the development of programs to prepare gifted educators. In the fall of the same year, the NAGC/CEC standards were adopted by National Council for Accreditation for Teacher Education (NCATE). NCATE-accredited colleges and universities have started to use these standards as a basis for institutional and gifted program reviews.

Conclusion

The NAGC/CEC standards are highly important to ensure effectiveness of gifted education programs across school districts and to bring consistency and coherence to nationwide teacher education programs in gifted education. However, this framework can serve only as a model for universities that offer such programs and for district-based professional development programming. Thus, the lack of professional development for pre-service teachers and teachers in schools in how best to serve the needs of gifted students is not superficial, but rather profound in its influence on these students' learning and achievement. Only a small number of universities have programs specifically designed for teachers working with gifted students. The number of states that require formal coursework and special certification is not large (citation). Furthermore, most gifted children spend at least 80% of their time in regular classrooms and receive services from general education teachers (citation). It is now essential to find consensus on effective ways to solve problems with teacher-preparation in working with gifted students.

Implications and Recommendations

Endorsement courses and professional development offer growth opportunity for deeper understanding ofresearch-based practice, and awareness of teachers' knowledge gaps in the area of gifted education. As endorsement requirements lead to an increase in teacher awareness regarding the nature of gifted learners, it is more likely that school districts will pay much more attention to ongoing professional development.

The NAGC/CEC collaboration was an important attempt to solve a key teacher preparation problem in the field of gifted education. However, without supplemental policies, the problem remains and can create a lack of coherence and comprehensiveness in teacher training and ongoing professional development. It is evident that there is

a need to contemplate a sweeping solution to this problem. One possible solution might be act upon the general consensus calling for efforts to come up with coherence among states' policies on gifted education (citation-which efforts?). Specifically, if research studies support certification as a valuable requirement to teach the gifted, states should start creating such requirements for pre-service coursework and in-service training. State policy makers also should use the NAGC/CEC standards as a model in their state-based programs.

One of the key features of the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) initiative is that it provides high standards that are consistent across many states. The CCSS and the NAGC/CEC standards have some areas of agreement, for example, incorporating critical and creative thinking in content-area instruction (citation). Further efforts to align these standards in areas of common need might help not only students in teacher preparation programs, but also teachers in both gifted education and general education. Note that gifted education can be a pilot study for new educational techniques and part of a potential support system for general education (Gallagher, 2004).

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