

EDUCATORS' ATTITUDES TOWARDS GIFTED STUDENTS AND THEIR EDUCATION IN A REGIONAL QUEENSLAND SCHOOL

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Abstract

As the primary providers in meeting the educational needs of gifted students, educators are pivotal in the provision of positive experiences for these students. The Gagné–Nadeau Attitude Scale: Opinions about the gifted and their education, was used to determine the attitudes of educators in a regional Queensland school toward gifted students and their education. Educators at the school were also asked to provide information pertaining to their pre-service and professional learning in regard to gifted education. Results indicated that educators at the school are, overall, ambivalent in their attitudes towards gifted students and their education. There is no indication that specialised pre-service education or isolated professional learning experiences affect teacher attitudes in this area. Future research could include the development of an attitudinal survey drawn from the Australian educational context along with research into how to improve educators' attitudes and practice in this area.

Introduction

Equal opportunity requires that all students, regardless of their level of ability, should be encouraged and facilitated to develop their potential to the fullest.

(Gross, 1999, p. 94.)

The fundamental right of children to receive an adequate and appropriate education to meet their needs is a well-supported and indoctrinated philosophy of many first-world countries. It supports the provision of government-sponsored education systems and is a morally sound rationale for the provision of educational services. Unfortunately for gifted students, however, provision is not always accomplished:

These children have special needs in the education system; for many their needs are

not being met; and many suffer underachievement, boredom, frustration and psychological distress as a result (Commonwealth of Australia, 2000, § 1.1).

This article explores aspects of this issue by surveying the educational background, level of professional development and opinions of educators regarding gifted students.

Literature review

Educators' attitudes, opinions, experience and actions are instrumental in providing a positive and productive learning environment for gifted and talented students. At the time of this study, apart from Victoria (Parliament of Victoria, 2012), each Australian state's educational department supported a policy or framework written specifically to guide appropriate educational experiences for gifted students. Despite the existence of these guides, there appeared to be a disparity between policy and practice in relation to gifted education. The most recent nationwide report on gifted education in Australian schools confirms that the specialist needs of gifted children in educational systems are not being addressed, and that many gifted children are suffering as a result (Commonwealth of Australia, 2000, § 1.1).

This review of the literature is presented under the following main headings: (1) Educators' attitudes toward the education of gifted and talented students, and (2) Pre-service and professional learning in gifted and talented education.

Educators' attitudes towards the education of gifted and talented students

The Gagné–Nadeau Attitudinal Scale for assessing opinions about the gifted and their education (Gagné, 1995; see Table 1) has become recognised as providing researchers with an avenue for producing replicable and comparative results of educators' attitudes towards gifted students and their education. This scale was written following an experimental research project undertaken by Nadeau (1984, cited by Gagné, 1995; see Table 1, next page) and evaluates attitudes about the predominant aspects of education concerning both the educational and affective learning needs of gifted students.

Several studies have been undertaken in Australia using the Gagné–Nadeau Attitudinal Scale for assessing the attitudes of educators

towards gifted students and gifted education. These small-scale studies have also addressed some of the concerns raised by Bégin and Gagné (1994) in their analysis of empirical studies available prior to 1994, namely, the variability of questionnaire types, lack of homogeneity, limited potential explanatory factors and varied sample sizes. The results of these studies will be reviewed based on the six orthogonal factors noted by Gagné (1995).

Table 1: Sequential Development of the Gagné–Nadeau Scale

| Year | Author(s) | Article Title |
|------|--------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 1983 | Nadeau, L. | Construction of an Attitude Scale Toward Giftedness (Gifted Children) [Unpublished and referenced in Gagné, 1995] |
| 1985 | Gagné, F. and Nadeau, L. | Dimensions of Attitudes Towards Giftedness |
| 1994 | Bégin, J. and Gagné, F. | Predictors of General Attitude Toward Gifted Education: A Review of the Literature and a Blueprint for Future Research |
| 1995 | Gagné, F. | Brief Presentation of Gagné & Nadeau's Attitude Scale: Opinions about the gifted and their education. [The survey is dated 1991 within the paper] |

Needs and support

Gifted students require a diversity of support that addresses their intellectual, social and emotional needs (Merrotsy, 2008). Australian researchers (Parsons, 2009; Smith & Chan, 1998; Zundans, 2006) have concluded that there is strong agreement among educators that there is a need for specialist educational services for gifted students. Conversely, Béchervaise (1996) concluded that there was an ideological resistance to the concept of special provision for gifted students. Lassig's (2009) Queensland-based study noted ambivalent attitudes regarding the support of these students.

Resistance to objections

The phenomenon termed 'tall poppy syndrome' refers to the tendency of Australians to 'cut down the tall poppies' in order to bring everyone to the same level in various fields (Geake & Gross, 2008; Gross, 1997; Robinson, 1992). This unfortunate syndrome appears to have infiltrated classrooms to the point where educators are often more comfortable teaching average students over gifted students (Geake & Gross, 2008) and where many educators view gifted education as an elitist concept (McCann, 2007).

Social value

Borland (1989, 2012) takes the view that there are two distinct approaches to addressing the needs of gifted students: the national-resource approach and the special-education approach. He argues that the national-resource approach displaces the current needs of the individual student in the pursuit of eminence. Several definitions of giftedness have used the concept of future greatness as their focus, or end product (Renzulli, 2011; Subotnik, Olszewski-Kubilius & Worrell, 2011). However, Borland (2012) takes the stance that the special-education approach is more focused on the needs of the individual gifted student and that it is only through this approach that all gifted students will receive the education that they require. This more personable approach is echoed in Gagné's (2008) Differentiated Model of Giftedness and Talent (DMGT) where the focus is on the development of talent for individual gifted students related to each student's specific circumstances.

Rejection

One of the noted characteristics of gifted children is that they can distance themselves from same-age peers. This behaviour is often interpreted by educators as social immaturity but it is actually a demonstration of social maturity beyond that of their peers (Farrent & Grant, 2005, cited in McCann, 2007). This misconception may affect the manner in which educators perceive the social interactions of the gifted child (Zundans, 2006). However, there is an indication that educators can also perceive gifted children as popular, friendly and well behaved (Lassig, 2009; Zundans, 2006) and that they may not be aware of some of the difficulties faced by gifted children (Lassig, 2009).

Ability grouping

Ability grouping, for gifted students, refers to multi-age grouping, cluster grouping, part-time ability grouping and full-time ability grouping

(Catholic Education Office, Sydney, 2007). Davis, Rimm and Siegle (2011) contend that the advantages of this type of grouping cater to both the social and academic needs of the gifted student. Despite this view, some educators consider that this type of enrichment should only be used as an academically viable option (Zundans, 2006) on an ad hoc basis (Smith & Chan, 1998) or not used at all (Béchervaise, 1996). Some schools even have divided opinions among educators as to the viability of ability grouping altogether (Lassig, 2009; Parsons, 2009). It should be pointed out, though, that agreement with the concept of ability grouping within a school does not necessarily mean that students are offered this option (Smith & Chan, 1998).

School acceleration

Academic acceleration can include early entry to the preparatory year of school, grade skipping, subject skipping and credit through pretesting (Davis et al., 2011). Merrotsky supports acceleration as an appropriate response for students whose cognitive and social development is beyond that of their age peers (Merrotsky, 2008). Despite the ease of access to provisions for gifted students, there appears to be either resistance (Béchervaise, 1996; Zundans, 2006) or ambiguity (Parsons, 2009) towards academic acceleration in Australian schools. One of the greatest concerns for educators in relation to acceleration appears to be that of social adjustment (Lassig, 2009; Smith & Chan, 1998). These misapprehensions of poor social adjustment relating to acceleration could be considered as symptomatic of a lack of awareness and understanding of the nature of gifted and talented children (Smith & Chan, 1998).

Pre-service and professional learning in gifted and talented education

Pre-service teacher education

Pre-service teacher education is an important aspect of the preparedness of educators to effectively recognise and teach gifted students. The National Association for Gifted Children in the US (NAGC, 2012) considers that pre-service teacher training should address educational foundations for gifted students. Studies undertaken in Australian universities indicate that pre-service teachers are dissatisfied with the level of learning in the area of gifted and talented education (Carrington & Bailey, 2000; Harris & Hemmings, 2008). Findings also suggest that pre-service educators benefit from a directed exposure to gifted students and gifted

education options, thus permitting these inexperienced educators to feel more confident in their delivery of education to gifted students (Carrington & Bailey, 2000; Harris & Hemmings, 2008; Hudson, Hudson, Lewis & Watters, 2010).

Professional learning

Professional learning, or professional development, is an integral aspect of the registration process for educators who work in schools. For example, from 2013 all educators working in educational institutions in Queensland need to comply with the Australian Professional Standards for Teachers (Queensland College of Teachers, 2011). Standard 6 of these professional standards relates to professional learning and requires that all registered educators 'engage in professional learning and improve practice' (p. 18). Contrary to the American findings of McCoach and Siegle (2007), educators' attitudes towards gifted education and gifted students in Australia do improve through professional learning (Geake & Gross, 2008; Johnson, Haensly, Ryser & Ford, 2002; Lassig, 2009; Smith & Chan, 1998; Zundans, 2006). Lassig's (2009) study across no less than eight Queensland schools strongly suggests that 'improving teachers' behaviour and pedagogy requires improving teachers' attitudes towards gifted children and their education' (p. 40).

Research questions

Based around the Gagné–Nadeau Scale on Opinions about the Gifted and their Education (1995; see Table 1), this study explored the following two research questions:

What are the opinions of educators in a regional Queensland school concerning gifted students and specialised gifted education?

To what extent do the opinions of educators towards gifted education reflect the level of professional learning undertaken in the area of gifted education?

The study is set within the Australian context, and in particular in an independent Queensland school. Hence, the focus here is on the opinions of educators in an independent, regional Queensland school towards gifted students and their education and on whether or not these opinions are a reflection of any pre-service or professional learning in this area.

Methodology

A mixed-methods approach to this study was considered to be the most feasible for attempting to gain information within the context of a busy school. The quantitative aspect of the research design was used as the main element in attempting to measure attitudinal factors (O'Toole & Beckett, 2010). The qualitative questions in this study were viewed as supportive of the quantitative data rather than as a source for separate rigorous analysis (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2007).

The primary research instrument used in this study was the Gagné–Nadeau Attitude Scale on Opinions about the gifted and their education (1995; see Table 1). The two questions relating to whether or not educators undertook undergraduate learning in gifted education as either a part of a general education subject or a specialist subject were responded to in a yes/no format. Participants were also asked to describe any professional learning in gifted education and to provide details on any classroom adjustments for gifted students.

Respondents in this research study were asked to indicate age, denote gender, provide number of years' teaching experience and specify their highest level of education. The respondents were also asked to indicate which sector of the P–12 school was their main area of employment. Approximately one hundred teaching and academic administrative staff in the school were provided with a copy of the survey and asked to return the completed survey over the period of one week. Forty-nine participants responded. The survey forms were collected, collated and marked as per Gagné's guidelines (1995; see Table 1) and these data, along with variable data, were entered into a Microsoft Excel 2010 spreadsheet, checked for discrepancies and then analysed using the IBB Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) Statistics 21 software for statistical analysis.

Findings and discussion

Attitudes of educators

The Gagné–Nadeau Scale was the primary instrument for addressing the first research question in the study. The 48% of educators at the school who responded to the survey demonstrated an overall ambivalent or neutral attitude towards gifted students and their education (Total Mean Score 3.0). This overall ambivalent response and wide range of

responses could arise from two different indicators. Firstly, there had been no discernible specialised gifted education program and little professional learning in gifted education in recent years at the school. Secondly, many of the educators at the school came from a variety of backgrounds where their level of experience in gifted education was varied.

Needs and support

Educators in this study indicated that as a cohort they were not completely ambivalent and yet not completely positive concerning the needs and support of gifted students (Total Mean Score 3.4). However, it was the most positive overall response for any of the orthogonal factors in the survey. In comparison to other Australian studies using the Gagné–Nadeau Scale (Béchervaise, 1996; Parsons, 2009; Smith & Chan, 1998; Zundans, 2006), where educators were quite positive about the needs and support of gifted students, educators in this school demonstrated slightly less positive attitudes in regard to the support of gifted students and their needs. This result is similar to the Queensland study of Lassig (2009).

Resistance to objections

Educators at the school tended to resist objections to the notion that special provision for gifted students was elitist or that these students did not require support in their education. Most educators demonstrated a positive or neutral attitude in this area (Total Mean Score 3.3) although female educators stood out more than male educators as having a positive attitude in this regard. Compared to other Australian studies (Béchervaise, 1996; Parsons, 2009; Smith & Chan, 1998; Zundans, 2006), the gifted students in this Queensland school appear to be subjected to 'tall poppy syndrome' (Geake & Gross, 2008; Gross, 1999; Robinson, 1992) more than gifted students in other states. The attitudes of educators at the school surveyed were only slightly more positive in regard to positive support of gifted students than those in the only other Queensland study in this area (Lassig, 2009).

Social value

With neither a negative nor profoundly positive overall attitudinal response towards the social value of gifted individuals in society (Total Mean Score 3.3), the educators at the surveyed school did appear to support the single concept that gifted people are a valuable resource for society. They did, however, convey negative attitudes regarding the provision of specialist

educational services for gifted students. This attitudinal observation was also noted in other Australian studies (Lassig, 2009; Zundans, 2006) and appears to reflect Borland's (1989, 2012) national-resource approach towards the education of gifted students where the pursuit of eminence is a more desirable trait than the success of the individual student.

Rejection

More than half of the educators who participated in the study responded in a negative manner to the orthogonal factor based around the possible rejection of gifted students in peer and classroom environments (Total Mean Score 2.5). This result indicates that these educators are not aware of some of the peer difficulties faced by gifted children and that peer rejection is not a consideration made by these educators. The results of this study concur with those of Lassig (2009) and Zundans (2006) in that many educators have negative attitudes towards the possible rejection of gifted students by their peers. However, I would consider the following two points before accepting this interpretation. First, only three of the thirty-four items on the survey were dedicated to this orthogonal factor, the lowest number in the instrument, a point previously noted by Zundans (2006). And second, each of the questions used in determining the attitudes of educators towards the isolation of gifted students contains terms that could be construed as negative language such as 'difficulty', 'threatened' and 'rejected'. It is possible that participants felt threatened by the nature of the questions (Mertens, 1998) and responded negatively for this reason.

Ability grouping

There was a dominating negative attitude from the participants in this study in regard to ability grouping, with only thirteen educators indicating a positive attitude. This result may, in part, be due to the restricted structure of the school itself, as there is a very clear delineation of in-class educational provision within the school with limited access to specialist support outside the classroom for gifted students. This finding was also reflected in Lassig's (2009) and Zundans' (2006) studies.

School acceleration

Nearly half of the respondents in this study revealed a negative attitude towards accelerative practices for gifted students. The surveyed school provides an educational environment that does not openly or regularly provide accelerative opportunities for gifted students. This lack of

support for accelerative practice and educators' lack of experience or understanding of the benefits for the student may, in part, be responsible for this strong negative attitude. Several other Australian researchers have reported similar negative attitudinal responses towards accelerative practice (Béchervaise, 1996; Lassig, 2009; Smith & Chan, 1998).

Pre-service and professional learning and its effects in gifted education

In order to respond to the second research question, this study explored the range of professional learning activities undertaken in gifted education by educators at the school surveyed. The aim of this exploration was to understand the influence professional learning activities may have on educators' opinions in relation to gifted education and their classroom practice in this regard.

Pre-service learning in gifted education

Educators at the school surveyed appeared to have no significant attitudinal differences regarding gifted students and their education based on whether or not any pre-service education in this area had taken place. There was no discernible evidence to support the view that the study of gifted education as a part of a general special education course or as a specialised course improved educators' opinions about gifted students.

The lack of positive influence on educators who had undertaken pre-service learning in gifted and talented education could be attributed to several factors. Pre-service teachers involved in generalised special education courses may not have received enough training to completely comprehend the nature of gifted students and their learning needs. It should also be considered that in order to apply their new teaching skills for the first time, educators need to focus on the context of the environment in which they work. If educators are not exposed to a system where the needs of the gifted are addressed through structural and supportive measures, then they may be less motivated to acknowledge these needs through attitudinal adjustment. An improvement in pre-service learning experiences for educators may help them to break the cycle of poor and ambivalent attitudes toward gifted education in schools and help them to develop more confidence when addressing gifted students' educational needs (Carrington & Bailey, 2000; Harris & Hemming, 2008; Hudson et al., 2010).

Professional learning in gifted and talented education

In total, just over two out of every five educators in this study had undertaken some professional learning in the area of gifted education, predominantly limited to single-day workshops or seminars. For these educators, there was no indication that this professional learning had affected their attitudes towards the education of gifted students, as they were equally ambivalent in comparison with teachers who had not undergone any training. In fact, educators who had undergone some professional learning in gifted education were more negative about ability grouping than educators who had not. The lack of discernible positive responses from educators who had undergone some professional learning in gifted education could relate to the lack of a focused 'in school' approach to development in this area.

Classroom methods for gifted and talented students

Many of the participant educators reflected on positive classroom practices for gifted and talented students. The one in five educators who indicated that they did not use any particular classroom adaptations for gifted students were actually more sympathetic towards the needs of gifted students than the educators who did adapt classroom practice.

Limitations and future research

The participants for this study were confined to staff members of one independent regional Queensland school. This small sample significantly limits the generalisability to other schools in Queensland and Australia.

Educators' attitudes, opinions and experience are fundamental to managing a positive and productive learning environment for gifted and talented students. Further research could be directed towards exploring how to improve educators' attitudes towards gifted students and directly aimed at limiting the pervading ideologies of tall poppy syndrome and elitism. Australian researchers should also consider investigating the attitudes of Australian educators from an Australian educationally contextual perspective.

Conclusion

Gifted students require appropriate educational practices to ensure their emotional, social and learning needs are being addressed. Educators'

knowledge, attitudes and practices are fundamental to ensuring that positive educational experiences occur for gifted students.

This study focused on educators' attitudes towards gifted students as an aspect of understanding how educators viewed and addressed the needs of these students. The limited pre-service and ad hoc professional learning experiences of the educators at the surveyed school indicated that the current approach to supporting gifted students does not successfully promote positive attitudes towards gifted students and their educational requirements.

Continued resistance to positive practice in gifted education ensures a continuation of a generalised failure to meet gifted students' learning needs. In order to promote a change in attitudes towards gifted education in schools, there needs to be a shift in the focus in schools as a whole, where professional learning is the stimulant for focused classroom practice. True professional learning in gifted education can only come from continued support of educators in applying a new practice (Little & Housand, 2011).

Inclusive education for all students is understood as a human rights issue around the world (Florian, 2007). Only through an attitudinal shift in educational institutions, along with the active promotion of provision of specialised educational services, is it possible to meet the inclusive needs of all gifted students.

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