

Attitudes of Preservice and Experienced Teachers Toward Gifted Learners
An Expanded Abstract

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Introduction

Teacher attitudes provide another perspective from which to better understand teacher behavior, hence they need to be an important focus of educational research (Clark, 1988; Fenstermacher, 1986). Prevalent in the literature is the generalization that the knowledge teachers have gained from their own experiences as students shapes their attitudes toward teaching and learning (Calderhead, 1991; Calderhead & Robson, 1991; Etheridge, 1989; Fuller & Brown, 1975; Goodman, 1988; Griffin, 1989; Hollingsworth, 1989; Kagan, 1992b; McDiarmid, 1990; Pajares, 1992; Ross, 1988; Tabachnick & Zeichner, 1984). In his 1992 synthesis of findings on teachers' beliefs, Pajares identifies a fundamental assumption: attitudes and beliefs must be understood in terms of their connections not only to each other but also to other belief systems. Other findings in this synthesis suggest a strong relationship between teachers' attitudes and their planning, instructional decisions, and classroom practices. Wood and Floden (1990) contend knowledge of teachers' attitudes towards diverse learners is important because these attitudes "shape the interpretations teachers make of their classroom experiences" (p. 9).

A study of teachers' attitudes and practices relating to diversity can offer valuable insights about the current situation and guidelines for evoking change. This paper presents a portion of the data from a study to determine teachers' attitudes toward academically diverse learners.

The Nature of Teacher Attitudes

Gagne (1985) operationally defines attitude as "a state that influences or modifies the individual choices of personal action" (p. 229). An attitude is a readiness or predisposition to respond in a certain way and may be inferred from observation and/or measurement (Garrison & Magoon, 1972). Stern and Keislar (1975) identify six features of attitudes on which most of those studying attitudes of teachers agree. First, attitudes deal with the way a person feels. Second, attitudes are expressed in relation to something such as an idea, person, situation, practice and the like. Third, attitudes are dispositions to act in a specific way. Fourth, when there is a perception of choice of behavior, attitudes are more validly expressed. Fifth, attitudes influence behavior, although the extent of the influence depends on how both the attitude and behavior are defined and measured. Sixth, attitudes are learned through experience.

Attitudes of Preservice Teachers

Preservice teachers have spent literally thousands of hours during their own schooling in what Lortie (1975) calls an apprenticeship of observation. They see college classrooms and those who teach in them as differing little from those classrooms and people they knew during their own schooling. The teacher education program reaffirms, rather than challenges, the past (Koehler, 1985; McDiarmid, 1990; Pajares, 1992). Until ways to provide preservice teachers with schema in which to place the various strategies, techniques and pedagogical knowledge are devised, they have no need to challenge their pre-existing attitudes about teaching and learning.

Effects of Teacher Education Programs on Attitudes

Kagan's (1992b) review of 40 studies dealing with change in attitudes toward teaching underscores the fact that attitudes based on one's own experience as a student remain unchanged

by the preservice program and follow preservice teachers into student teaching. Several hypotheses found in the literature explain the seemingly unchanged set of attitudes and beliefs held by preservice teachers as they move into their field experience and subsequently into their professional roles as teachers. The first addresses the notion that preservice teachers become more liberal in attitude during their university program but move toward traditional views during student teaching or early inservice teaching (Veenman, 1984; Zeichner and Tabachnick, 1981). The second way of looking at this liberal-to-traditional shift is in terms of teacher socialization (Copeland, 1980; Lasley, 1980; Lortie, 1975; Ross, 1988; Tabachnick & Zeichner, 1984) which is complete before formal training is received. Zeichner and Tabachnick (1981) hold the third view: teacher education programs transmit essentially conservative perspectives and preservice teachers do not have the conceptual tools to transcend these ideas. Other researchers suggest the prior beliefs and attitudes of preservice teachers need to be studied within the teacher education program to allow some measurement of the effect of these on developing beliefs about meeting the needs of diverse learners (Ducette, Sewell, & Shapiro, 1996; Feiman-Nemser & Remillard, 1996; Putnam & Borko, 2000). Research studies support each of these hypotheses, and it is not clear whether one or a combination of them is the best explanation. What *does* seem clear, however, is, despite teacher training programs, previously held attitudes persist.

Attitudes Toward Diversity

Dealing with individual differences. The concept of individual differences among learners is difficult for preservice and beginning teachers. In Veenman's (1984) analysis of 83 studies dealing with perceived problems of beginning teachers, dealing with individual differences ranked third of 24 problems identified.

Goodman (1988) found preservice teachers viewed individualization as students working on tasks independently. They also expressed the belief that individualization has "something to do with being aware of children's interests" (p. 127). However, Goodman rarely observed preservice teachers teaching a lesson based on or incorporating students' interests. Instead, individual work consisted of different worksheets for different students depending on the particular skill needing practice. There was little match between their attitudes and practice. Consequently, preservice teachers may unconsciously redefine teaching "in terms of reaching those students with ability and simply controlling those whose ability and background undermine teaching efforts," rather than continuing to hold their positive attitudes toward meeting the needs of diverse learners (Hoy & Woolfolk, 1990, p. 295).

Paine (1990) studied prospective teachers' orientations toward diversity and identified four levels of orientation: the individual differences approach, the categorical approach, contextual differences, and the pedagogical perspective. Paine found the prospective teachers' attitudes most often reflected the individual difference orientation and rarely the pedagogical orientation to teaching and society, offering additional support to the conflict between positive attitudes toward diversity and actual practice.

Attitudes toward gifted learners. Regular educators appear less tolerant of students with exceptionalities than educators who have special training (Bryan, 1974; Buttery, 1978; House 1979; Jacobs, 1975; Leyser & Abrams, 1982; Panda and Bartel, 1972; Sachs, 1990). Rubenzer and Twaite (1979) determined that years of experience, grade level taught and familiarity with gifted and talented students were significantly related to teachers' various attitudes towards gifted

students. Other studies also indicate preservice teachers' attitudes correlate positively with their knowledge of gifted students (Hanninen, 1988; Kiley & Jensen, 1998; Morris, 1987; Nicely, Jr., Small, & Furman, 1980; Schack & Starko, 1990). However, Cramond and Martin (1987) found attitude towards gifted students did not change with experience. Preservice and experienced teachers had similar attitudes, although the preservice teachers were more negative.

To further investigate the issue of preservice teachers' attitudes toward diverse learners, this study addressed the following research questions: 1. What kind of attitude do preservice teachers hold toward diverse learners in general and gifted learners in particular? 2. What similarities/differences are there in the responses of preservice and experienced teachers on questions dealing specifically with gifted learners?

Methods

Participants

We had two subject groups, experienced teachers and preservice teachers. The preservice teachers had voluntarily registered for one of several full-day Saturday workshops on differentiating instruction. Of the 85 students participating in the workshops, 75 were elementary education majors, 7 were secondary education majors and 3 were other majors. There were 78 females and 7 males who participated in the study and reflected the ethnic diversity of the university. The experienced teachers came from five elementary schools that were participating in a Jacob K. Javits Gifted Programming grant that was a partnership between their school corporation and the university in which the preservice teachers were enrolled. There were 95 teachers in the sample, 6 male and 89 female. Teaching experience ranged from 3 to 36 years ($M=16$ years, $SD=10$ years).

Instrumentation

The four-part Survey of Practices with Students of Varying Needs (SOP) was developed by the staff of the National Research Center on the Gifted and Talented (NRC/GT) at the University of Virginia site. In this study we used the first section of the SOP, consisting of 35 questions addressing attitudes teachers hold about gifted, "average," and special education students. The participants responded to each question using a 5-item Likert-type scale ranging from strongly agree to strongly disagree. The alpha coefficient of the first section was .76 ($p<.01$) for the pilot study, and .87 ($p<.01$) for the present study.

Each of the 35 items in part one of the SOP was scored from one to four points, with "strongly agree" generally receiving the least and "strongly disagree" generally receiving the most points. In most cases, questions were worded so that the desirable answer was "strongly disagree" or "disagree." Exceptions were recoded so that "strongly agree" received the most and "strongly disagree" received the least points. Thus, the responses answered in the desired direction and reflecting positive attitudes always received the most points.

Procedure

The SOP was completed by participating preservice teachers at the beginning of each workshop. The experienced teachers completed the SOP at the beginning of their workshop.

Analyses

For this paper we analyzed the 15 questions dealing specifically with gifted students. The highest possible score was 60. For interpretation purposes, scores from 53 to 60 were considered very positive; 45 to 52, positive; 38 to 44, low positive; 37 to 31, low negative; 30 to 23, negative; and 22 to 15, very negative. An independent samples *t*-test was performed.

Results

The scores of the 15 “gifted” questions indicated similar positive attitudes for preservice and experienced teachers ($M = 44.1$, $SD = 4$; $M = 45.1$, $SD = 3.6$, respectively). Scores ranged from 35.5 to 57 for preservice teachers and 30 to 57 for experienced teachers. Percentages of responses reflecting a positive attitude toward gifted learners are presented in Table 1. To facilitate the interpretation of the data, the four options were collapsed to two options before percentages were calculated.

In determining similarities and differences in responses, we first looked for consensus, fewer than 20 points difference in the percentages of the two groups (Adams, 1993). Ten of the fifteen questions fit this criterion. Next, we examined questions to see if at least 75% of either group answered in the desired direction. Seven questions did not meet this criterion. For Questions 18, 24, 30, 33, and 34, preservice teachers’ responses did not meet this criterion. Two questions, 20 and 32 did not meet this criterion for either group.

Discussion

We did not seem to find the negative attitudes toward diverse learners that others have found (Bryan, 1974; Cramond & Martin, 1987; Jacobs, 1975; Leyser & Abrams, 1982; Sachs, 1990) nor did we find highly positive attitudes. Several studies indicate preservice teachers hold positive attitudes toward academically diverse learners (Adams, 1993; Sparapani, 1995; Megay-Nespoli, 2001; Moon, Callahan, & Tomlinson, 1999). Although the positive attitude of veteran teachers may be explained by their years of experience with diverse learners in the classroom, this does not hold for preservice teachers. A possible explanation for the positive attitudes of preservice teachers may be two-fold: 1) they perceive children deserve an education tailored to individual needs (McDiarmid, 1990); and 2) students who enter a teacher education program come with a positive attitude toward diverse learners intact (Pajares, 1992).

Turning to the first of two questions that reflected a negative attitude for both teacher groups, the issue may be one of double labeling. The question refers to students who are both LD and gifted. Some of the strategies that may work for a learning disabled child are often not appropriate for the learning disabled child who is also gifted (Whitmore, 1980; 1985). Both

groups of teachers may have answered from their own knowledge of learning disabled students and may have little knowledge of learning disabled/gifted students.

The second question referred to the disruption caused by gifted students leaving the classroom to attend special classes. This seems to be a point of contention between regular classroom teachers and those providing the alternative program. For experienced teachers, this question seems to reflect a negative attitude; the responses of preservice teachers may reflect the anxiety they already have about managing a classroom (Kagan, 1992a; Hollingsworth, 1989).

Overall, it appears respondents in both groups gave evidence of fairly positive attitudes toward diverse learners in general, and toward gifted learners in particular. Responses between both groups were somewhat similar. The survey, however, is a self-report instrument and items may fall to "it depends" thinking, depending on the match between the attitudes presented in the survey and the individual's own reality. Wood and Floden (1990) also found it difficult to interpret the high instances of consensus in their study of preservice and experienced teachers and the attitudes towards diversity held by these groups. They indicated teachers may give responses that tend to be socially acceptable or may try to please those who give them surveys.

It would be naive to assume teacher attitude is the only factor that determines what is done in the classroom. Several studies have pointed out the conflict between attitude and practice, particularly between experienced and novice groups (Berliner, 1987; Carter, Sabers, Cushing, Pinnegar, & Berliner, 1987; Goodman, 1988). Experienced teachers should have different, more sophisticated ways of thinking about teaching than individuals with little classroom experience. Their attitudes may be similar, but the way those attitudes influence their actions may differ. Two studies of preservice and experienced teachers indicate positive attitudes towards academically diverse learners but only minimal attention to transforming those attitudes and beliefs into action in the classroom (Tomlinson et.al., 1994; Hootstein, 1998). In keeping with the idea that teachers' behaviors reflect their attitudes as much as do their answers to self-report instruments (Munby, 1982, 1984; Wilson, 1990), a next step to discern greater differences between attitudes and practices would be to observe in these teachers' classrooms.

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Table 1

Percentages of Responses Reflecting a Positive Attitude by Group

	Pre	Exp
3. Gifted students can make it on their own and need no special provisions.	100%	91%
7. Gifted students will take their regular assignments and make them more challenging on their own.	91%	87%
10. An effective way to identify gifted students is to look for students with the highest grades.	95%	86%
13. Allowing gifted students to work on assignments that are different from the rest of the students' is playing favorites and fostering elitism.	97%	95%
16. Gifted students need longer assignments since they work faster.	97%	92%
18. Working too hard in school leads to burn-out in gifted students.	64%	88%
20. Learning disabled students who are also gifted will need to concentrate their study to remediate their weaknesses so they can go on to use their areas of strength.	27%	64%
21. Gifted students are easy to identify in the classroom.	86%	78%
22.* Work that is too easy or boring frustrates a gifted child just as work that is too difficult frustrates an average learner.	99%	91%
24.* Gifted students should be encouraged to direct their own learning.	46%	81%
27.* Some underachievers are actually gifted students.	100%	94%
30. If a gifted student is doing poorly in spelling, it is necessary to deal with the weakness in spelling before presenting more advanced content in other areas.	55%	92%
32. Removing special education and gifted students from the classroom for special classes is disruptive to the class schedule.	53%	56%
33. In teaching gifted students, teachers should modify the content only, since all students need to use the same processes and can generate the same projects.	60%	79%
34. Having gifted students work on individual projects or assignments isolates them from the rest of the class.	59%	88%

Note: Pre = Preservice Teacher; Exp = Experienced Teacher.

In most cases the desired direction of the response was "disagree." An asterisk denotes an exception and the desired direction of the response was "agree" instead of "disagree."

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