Chapter 15

Principals’ Perceptions of GATE Teachers

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ABSTRACT

Much has been written on the education of gifted and talented students, including the professional education of teachers for gifted and talented students. However, not much research exists on the education of gifted and talented faculty members. This chapter attempts to address this void. This chapter describes a research study undertaken to assess principals’ perceptions of gifted and talented faculty members in their respective schools. Feedback from the principals addresses such topics as the education, professional development, characteristics, and retention of these teachers.

INTRODUCTION

Much has been written on GATE or gifted education. Specifically, that is either the education of gifted and talented students or the curriculum of these teachers’ professional education. However, little or no research exists on the characteristics and traits of those teachers who themselves are gifted.

These teachers are masters of their craft. Those who can enter a classroom totally unprepared and do a better job than others who have prepped for the learning episode. These are the teachers who have an outstanding reputation; these are the ones whose classrooms parents want their children placed in. These teachers you never forget for they have left an indelible mark on you.

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What are the characteristics of these gifted teachers? What is it that makes them stand out among their colleagues? Why do their building principals want to retain them? The purpose of this study is to identify some of these characteristics. This was accomplished by interviewing six building principals; two elementary, two middle grades and two at the high school level, analyzing and categorizing their replies. What emerged was a list of characteristics common to GATE teachers.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Determining what it means to be an effective or exemplary teacher is a complex endeavor. The meaning of “effective, exemplary, quality” (all used interchangeably here) are contested (Warner, 2016), as are the various bases upon which to determine effectiveness. Furthermore, the measurements we use to make determinations about teacher quality, such as student academic outcomes, cognitive development, or teacher traits, actions, and practices, are similarly complex and contain simultaneous and overlapping influences nested in the teacher, their students and the school and community context (to name a few). As researchers have endeavored to determine effectiveness based on various outcomes (i.e. cognitive, motivational-affective, and learning processes), different sets of practices and indicators of effectiveness have emerged as the strongest predictors of exemplary teaching (Seidel & Shaverson, 2007).

Even if one could account for student, school and community factors as some studies have (Seebruck, 2015; Stronge, Ward, Tucker, & Hindman, 2007; Munoz, Scoskie, & French, 2013), there are contested meanings around effective teachers and effective teaching practice. Should one emphasize teacher traits (background, education, qualifications, gender, ethnicity) and cognitive characteristics (beliefs, dispositions, content knowledge, pedagogical approach), or should we simply observe what they do in their teaching practice (Kyriakides, Christoforou, & Charalambous, 2013)? Moreover, those who have spent time observing teachers and judging their effectiveness often note certain intangible qualities, some manner of “it” factor that escapes adequate operationalization in the extant research. Despite the complexity of the issue, teacher quality is of substantial scholarly and practical interest because of strong evidence that teacher effectiveness (however defined) seems to have a substantial effect on many of the core goals of education including student cognitive development, academic learning, and social/emotional development (Munoz et al., 2013; Stonge, Ward, & Grant, 2011; Palardy & Rumberger, 2008; Warner, 2016).

Process-Product Models of Teacher Effectiveness

Early research on teacher effectiveness through the second half of the 20th century focused on determining which teaching practices had the strongest effect on students’ academic outcomes. This literature is often referred to as “process-product,” as it attempted to trace a relatively linear path from the process of teachers to the learning products of students in a scientific manner (Dunkin & Biddle, 1974; Good & Brophy, 1997; Scheerens & Bosker, 1997; Warner, 2016). An important contribution of this research was the identification of an ever-growing list of instructional practices that were related (at least statistically) to student learning outcomes. Muñoz, Prather, and Stronge (2011) organized effective practices into the following categories: 1) teacher qualifications, 2) teacher-student relationships, 3) classroom management, 4) high expectations and differentiation, and 5) assessment and feedback. While a full treatment of effective classroom practices is beyond the scope of this review, numerous studies have provided comprehensive listings of classroom practices that have been linked to student outcomes (Kington,
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