

Best Practices of the United States' Gifted Education Teacher-Training Programs

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Abstract

The paper deals with gifted education teacher training in a number of American states. The analysis is based on documents of national and state associations for gifted children and works of contemporary Russian and international researchers in the field. The methods applied to achieve the solution of the research problem are descriptive method for observation and classification of the investigated material, system oriented analysis of literature as well as government and non-government official papers, codes, plans and reports on the problem.

The authors conclude that developing a system of gifted education teacher training is a multifaceted process which largely depends on fruitful collaboration of universities, regional resource and professional development centres and associations for gifted children to ensure the correct identification and specific outcomes of the gifted students. The paper might be of interest for municipal, regional, national state and non-state parties involved in nurturing the unique abilities and needs of the valuable human resource of a country - gifted and talented children and youth.

Keywords: giftedness, GT Students, teacher training and professional development, the US.

1. INTRODUCTION

The United States has recently changed its approach to the problem of gifted education. Hence, the necessity to provide gifted children with educational opportunities to meet their unique needs and academic potential has been criticized. Accusations of elitism, and, as a consequence, lack of funding, which was common at the end of the last century, led to the closure of a number of special gifted students programs [1]. As a result, today the vast majority of gifted students go to secondary schools rather than specialized ones. This fact places increased demand on the level of training of the main providers of secondary education – middle school teachers.

Along with *the National Association for Gifted Children (NAGC)* and *the Council for Exceptional Children (CEC)* there are over twenty other local associations in the US based in California, Louisiana, Missouri, Ohio, Texas, Florida, etc. They all define the main coordinates of gifted education in accordance with the unique demographic and socio-economic characteristics of the region. In addition, over a hundred of US colleges and universities offer Bachelor Degree and Master Degree courses as well as various training courses for teachers aimed to nurture the high potential of their students.

Ensuring quality of teacher training is indeed one of the leading tools for internal national policy and a significant factor of the international influence and prestige. The problem is of special scientific interest and social importance as theoretical knowledge in quality assurance of education is of incomplete character. It makes a search for adequate characteristics of scientific categories particularly popular [2].

The study of the issue suggests that the US has accumulated considerable experience in this area. The authors relied on the findings partly presented in the works of Russian researchers A. Savenkov [1], D. Molokov [3], E. Aksenova [4], B. Nasakova [5], etc. who stated the need to ensure flexibility of the staff of the educational system and marked the direction for improving the quality of gifted education teaching staff training. However, regional approach to the formation of the teacher training system to provide for proper GT education is not adequately reflected in the works and needs a more detailed study.

The purpose of this paper is to summarize and systematize the best practices of certain US's states in training middle school teaching staff to work with gifted students. The research is based on the materials of national and regional associations of education for gifted children as well as the works by contemporary Russian and international researchers on training teachers to work with gifted children. Methods of comparative analysis and synthesis of the studied material were used by the authors.

2. METHODS

To provide well-grounded conclusions on the status of the problem in different regions of the USA, the following theoretical and practical methods were applied to achieve the solution of the research problem:

- a descriptive method for observation and classification of the investigated material;
- a system oriented analysis of literature as well as government and non-government official papers, codes, plans and reports on the problem.

3. RESULTS

3.1. Standards and Challenges of Teacher-Training Programs for the Gifted

The start-up for all programs is the recognition of a need to provide in each state and school district free in-service education, training and professional development of specialists involved in the identification and training of gifted children: teachers, principals, administrators, and others. Therefore, *the National Association for Gifted Children* has developed a number of standards which

we can easily reformulate as challenges. These have to be met by each individual schools and the school districts to create the most effective system of development GT (gifted and talented) children. Let's consider these standards in more detail:

1. Education and development. Recognizing gifted students' unique abilities and aptitudes the teaching staff creates favourable conditions for their constant self-development in school, family, and community.
2. Assessment. Introduction of a special procedure to make gifted nomination and identification process most effective and child-oriented.
3. Curriculum. Relying on modern psychological and pedagogical research on the development of children's giftedness teachers modify the basic curriculum accordingly.
4. Learning environment. The school and school district support value pluralism of multicultural American society together with personal and social responsibility when children master direct and indirect interpersonal skills as well as demonstrate desire to achieve as new time requires.
5. Syllabus. Teachers regularly monitor the level of cognitive, creative and emotional development of their GT students as well as their achievements and gifted potential and modify the syllabus accordingly.
6. Professional development. All members of the staff are tested in their professional competence in accordance with a set of standards to later undergo a relevant professional development course. Teachers' qualification level is evaluated primarily on the basis of the achievements of their gifted students [6].

Teachers' "abilitation" (gaining the qualifications that agree with the requirements of the National Association) includes a series of stages allowing the teaching staff to acquire the following competencies: 1) principles of GT children development; 2) characteristics of gifted behaviour and GT learning styles; 3) long-term planning and modification of curriculum; 4) forms and methods of teaching GT students in middle school; 5) modelling of the learning environment; 6) assessment of GT students; 7) axiological problems of modern secondary education system; 8) challenges of oral and written communication in a multicultural society; 9) networking with the teaching staff and the gifted child's family and community [7].

3.2. Unity in Variety

However, in accordance with the federal structure of the US, requirements for those working with gifted children vary from state to state. Having analysed the requirements of a number of regional associations, we will try to identify the steps that will allow us to meet the above assigned challenges and ensure the quality of gifted children teacher training.

The Department of Primary and Secondary Education in Missouri considers as 'acceptable' the requirement for school and district administrations, consultants and members of the Board of Trustees responsible for the special program to undergo an annual professional development course in GT children training [8]. In Texas this provision is specified in *The Texas State Plan for the Education of Gifted/Talented Students*. The 'in compliance' level requires of the teachers, willing to work with GT children, to do a 30-hour training course on the following issues of GT education: gifted students' characteristics and needs, assessment procedure, modification of the curriculum, teaching methods. In addition, experts already involved in the GT development program have to do an annual 6-hour professional development course on the issues listed above [9].

In general, the US pays a lot of attention to teachers' personal and professional self-development. Support is provided to all teachers doing a PhD or improving their skills independently both in the subject they teach and in special (gifted) education.

Moreover, to obtain a certificate for teaching GT children in Louisiana, for example, a teacher, in addition to other requirements, has to obtain a Master Degree in Education or Psychology, or the subject they teach. A certificate for teaching GT children is awarded in case the specialist has

teaching experience and a certificate of professional achievements in the relevant field of knowledge [10].

The requirements are justified because *flexible ability grouping*, for instance, which is successfully practised in several American states (Louisiana, Missouri, Pennsylvania, Texas, etc.) to provide gifted education within the regular middle school premises, is unlikely to be found in basic curriculum classes. During the school day learners are placed in different groups to study different school subjects at their level of achievement and potential, so this is a flexible grouping strategy. GT learners move within different age level groups throughout a school week, taking a few classes with mainstream students of their age [8]. GT students benefit enormously from this constant 'shuffle'; at every lesson they are placed in a group according to their level of ability and aptitude in a particular subject, which comes upon the teachers who work in these classes [11].

It is obvious that the teacher is not able to provide maximum opportunities to identify and meet the unique potential and needs of the most able students. To do this a number of states have introduced the position of a supervisor to guide the selection and training process under the special program in each school district and throughout the state. This responsibility is placed on the Supervisor of Special Education (Louisiana), the Commissioner of Education (Texas), the TAG Coordinator (Oregon, Indiana), and others [6; 8; 9; 10].

3.3. Regional Goals - National Aims

Work of various specialists and educational facilities in Indiana deserves special attention. *Indiana Strategic Plan for Gifted Education* reflects the interaction of the three main agents of professional development of teachers: Professional Development Centres, Resource Centres and state universities. Each of them performs a number of tasks that help achieve the three goals set by the Department of Education:

Goal 1. To exchange information on the most effective programs, forms and methods of work with GT students.

Here the main task of professional development and resource centres is to provide access to Internet resources on the issue and bring useful information about the program through the Internet to the attention of all the participants of the teaching-learning process (administration, teachers, parents, students). State universities face a number of traditional challenges to deal with. They sponsor conferences, workshops and 'working groups' on the problems of giftedness.

Goal 2. To search and publish the data confirming that continuous professional development of teachers enhances gifted education. The implementation of this goal is placed on state universities which also consider the following issues:

- development of training techniques that will identify social and emotional needs of the most able pupils;
- holding conferences and seminars to discuss the most effective programs of the previous year;
- coordinating the activities of a university and district professional development programs, etc.

Goal 3. To systematically evaluate the relation of the level of efficiency of GT student programs and staff professional development programs [6].

In this case all the participants of this process contribute to the achievement of the goal: universities develop evaluation criteria, professional development centres collect information and evaluate the impact of professional development programs on the effectiveness of GT student special programs, and resource centres acquaint professionals and the public with the findings.

It becomes obvious that the teacher, being the main organizer of the learning process, has to meet certain challenges to provide for efficient gifted education in middle school, such as:

1) teacher's mentality alteration. The teacher should understand that the best way to deal with GT students is to allow them to move through the curriculum as they master the content and demonstrate the required skills. They should accept the possibility that according to the 'curriculum

compacting' GT students may find themselves in a group with the same level students but of a different age [1];

2) continuous professional development regarding new teaching methods and management of the learning process which would contribute to constant progress of gifted students;

3) readiness, if required, to do extra in-depth training in the subject taught, studying the content of the programs that goes beyond the basic training of high school teachers;

4) high level anticipation ability - the ability to predict possible consequences of the experimental teaching methods.

The authors reason that only in such conditions the teacher becomes "a catalyst for development of projects and ideas", "a student's personal advisor", "a person who can be turned to in need", helping to move away from "the once imposed order based on the inviolability of subjects... to the learning environment in which the teacher and the student are free to choose areas of common interests and problems that they can explore together" [1, p. 140-141].

5. DISCUSSION

In this regard we agree with D.R. Sabirova who argues in favour of the idea of continuous teacher education, where the initial teacher training should be seen as a first stage in professional teacher education. There is no mistaking that constant updating and development of general professional and pedagogical knowledge, adopting new challenges in education are likely to disclose the teacher's professional skills and efficiency to the full [2].

Finally, the paper concludes that launching a system of gifted education training is a multifaceted process. What was stated by S.S. Bodnar & N.P. Pomortseva regarding Canada can be applied worldwide: the modern system of postgraduate teacher education... is based on the conceptual approaches, providing professional development: behavioral - the change of a professional conduct of the teacher on the basis of the development of effectiveness of educational technology; personal - personal development of teachers, the disclosure of the identity in the teaching profession; cognitive - development of professional pedagogical intelligence of a teacher and enrichment of the subject-knowledge with modern approaches in the educational process; socio-psychological - the improvement of professional-communicative profile of a teacher, personal interaction in the 'teacher and a student system'; androgical - preserving the peculiarities of 'adult learning' in the organization of vocational teacher education [12]. This set of components seems overwhelming but can be ignored as it is crucial for the society to ensure the correct identification and successful development of the unique potential of a country's gifted students. The practices of the United States in providing the training and professional development of gifted education teachers is of particular interest to the modern education systems worldwide as they expect the middle school teaching staff to be more flexible in the issue. After all, "we can't achieve a world-class economy without supporting excellence in our schools..." [13].

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