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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to present the key implications for New South Wales classroom teachers that arise from the New South Wales gifted and talented policy, in conjunction with associated implementation documents and guidelines. Standards outlined within the policy and supporting documents show that it is the responsibility of teachers to identify gifted and talented learners in the mainstream classroom, establish and develop communicative and collaborative home–school partnerships and, further, implement appropriately differentiated curricula to adequately challenge gifted and talented learners. Through these actions, gifted and talented students will be more able to successfully develop their skills and abilities, as well as decreasing the risk of underachievement.

Keywords

gifted and talented, policy, identification, partnerships, differentiation



Teaching implications of gifted and talented learners within the mainstream classroom

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The purpose of this paper is to present the key implications for New South Wales classroom teachers that arise from the New South Wales gifted and talented policy, in conjunction with associated implementation documents and guidelines. Standards outlined within the policy and supporting documents show that it is the responsibility of teachers to identify gifted and talented learners in the mainstream classroom, establish and develop communicative and collaborative home–school partnerships and, further, implement appropriately differentiated curricula to adequately challenge gifted and talented learners. Through these actions, gifted and talented students will be more able to successfully develop their skills and abilities, as well as decreasing the risk of underachievement.

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The New South Wales gifted and talented policy (NSW DET 2004a) is an instrument designed to help teachers identify gifted and talented learners within the mainstream classroom, in order to maximise learning outcomes and effectively develop their skills and abilities. Defined as having “potential [and/or] skills which are distinctly above average in one or more areas” (NSW DET, 2004a, p.6), gifted and talented students comprise approximately 3–5% of learners within a subject area (NAPCSE, 2007). To facilitate the provision of appropriate educational opportunities for exceptional students, the policy sets out a number of standards and procedures for all New South Wales schools to follow. The key obligations for teachers that arise from this policy are to identify gifted and talented students, foster strong communicative and collaborative relationships between the learner’s home and school contexts, and implement appropriate educational strategies and differentiated curricula to support exceptional learners to fulfil their potential. Taking these steps, will contribute to teachers having a comprehensive knowledge of their students’ abilities and potential, thereby becoming more capable in ensuring that adequate educational experiences are incorporated into pedagogy and classroom practice.

Identification

As the introductory step in implementing differentiated curricula, identification has a number of implications for teachers. For instance, the policy stresses the responsibility of classroom teachers to initiate identification of gifted and talented



students, in conjunction with the utilisation of effective communication with support staff, parents and caregivers and other school community members as a means of obtaining a more in-depth view of students' current abilities and future potential (NSW DET, 2004b). Moreover, identification strategies must be comprehensive so as to accurately gauge these abilities in all domains of giftedness and talent. The idea of different domains of exceptionality is derived from Gagné's Model of Giftedness and Talent (Gagné 2004, cited in Vialle & Rogers, 2009). This model posits four key areas of giftedness and talent – intellectual, creative, social and physical – within which a variety of abilities, such as athletic, linguistic, leadership and artistic, operate. For this to occur, assessment must encompass a variety of criteria and not be limited to intellectual prowess only. In addition, the use of identification strategies must be continually on-going, rather than a sporadic event, as this allows for students to be recognised as gifted and talented at any stage of learning. Gifted and talented identification strategies are, therefore, not exclusive to students who show potential in their early years, but must also recognise those who develop exceptional skills and abilities at a later age. Any assessment strategies implemented must not be culturally restrictive, to ensure that students of culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds are not disqualified from possible recognition due to “prejudice, bias and misconception” (Vialle & Rogers, 2009, p.127). For teachers, this requires an intersect between a high level of understanding and knowledge of the members of their class, along with effective means to identify gifted and talented students.

Partnerships

As key stakeholders in the educational welfare of the gifted and talented child, it is the responsibility of teachers and parents to develop and maintain strong home–school partnerships in order to effectively support the identification of exceptional students by enabling teachers to thoroughly understand the educational requirements of the child (NSW DET, 2004a; Shaklee *et al.*, 1991). Through this ongoing relationship, parents and caregivers are able to offer valuable and consistent information about their child prior to and throughout schooling. This is especially essential for students of non-White descent, whose individual talents may be masked by cultural barriers, thereby impeding their accurate identification. This is illustrated by the broad disparity in the numbers of students identified from culturally, linguistically and economically diverse backgrounds, such as Indigenous students, as opposed to students of the dominant Anglo-Saxon culture (Bousnakis *et al.*, 2011; Pfeiffer, 2002). Also, by creating communicative channels, parents and caregivers are able to play a more active role in the student's education by sharing information with teachers and gaining an understanding of the learning needs of their child. This benefits the student in two ways:

- Parents and teachers who are aware of the needs of the child are able to act as educational advocates on behalf of the student, to ensure that the necessary provisions are allocated to gifted and talented learners (Wiskow, Fowler & Christopher, 2011).



- Open communication and collaboration allows for appropriate challenges to be provided. Exceptional students, when not adequately catered for, are unable to successfully mature their skills and abilities causing underachievement due to a decrease in motivation.

To optimise this home–school partnership, it is imperative for teachers to communicate openly, honestly and often with parents and caregivers about the needs of the exceptional child, as well as taking collaborative steps to make sure that these needs are met. In addition, the implementation of school-wide strategies that promote these partnerships, such as parent helpers or school open days, can support the establishment of positive home–school relationships.

Curriculum implications

The intended outcome of identification is ultimately to provide gifted and talented students with the high-quality differentiation that they need in order to fulfil their potential. Without appropriate educational challenges, gifted and talented students are at risk of underachieving due to “boredom, frustration and psychological distress” (Commonwealth of Australia, 2001, p.11). Fundamentally, this requires teachers to understand individual differences between students and devise school-wide strategies, such as the implementation of enrichment programs, special interest centres or individual mentoring, in order to cater for exceptional students (Frydenberg & O’Mullane, 2000; NSW DET, 2004c). There is also a demand for a strong, whole-school emphasis on educational opportunity and high expectations that promote motivation for all students, thus increasing the likelihood of achievement. Specifically within the classroom, it is essential that gifted and talented students are given appropriate challenges in order to further mature their skills, as well as develop a positive internal impetus and self-efficacy toward learning (Vialle & Rogers, 2009). What this means for teachers is that a more flexible approach must be taken when designing learning experiences, ensuring that they support exceptional students’ capacity for development and excellence within their particular domain of giftedness and talent. This is achievable through dynamic and comprehensive teaching and learning strategies, such as ability grouping, acceleration and higher-order thinking activities, for instance Bloom’s Taxonomy, that allow for a progression of growth that is inclusive of all students and caters for individualised needs at the same time (Athanassiou, McNett & Harvey, 2003).

Conclusion

Through understanding the key issues communicated in the New South Wales gifted and talented policy (NSW DET 2004a), educators will be better able to cater to the needs of exceptional students. This is achievable through the implementation of appropriate identification strategies carried out through a whole-school approach, supported by strong collaborative partnerships and open communication between the home and school contexts of gifted and talented learners. From this information, teachers can develop stimulating, challenging and enriching curricula to promote the



development of gifted and talented students' skills and abilities, ensuring they fulfil their potential while decreasing their chance of underachievement.

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