



Educational Experiences of Gifted Graduate Students Studying Gifted Education

Joi Lin, Ed.D. Student, University of Denver

Dr. Norma Hafenstein & Dr. Brette Garner, Faculty Advisors, University of Denver



Background and Review of Literature

This project began as a desire to understand the ideal or shared characteristics of teachers of gifted students. Researchers argued that the ideal teacher of the gifted was intellectually gifted themselves, as this supported deep understanding and awareness of the nature and needs of gifted students (Bishop, 1968; Rosemarin, 2014; Skipper, 1970).

A gap in the literature existed in describing the experiences of educators of gifted learners who are also gifted. This study was an opportunity to examine the educational and career experiences of gifted students who want to develop as educators of gifted learners. The research question being explored and answered is: What were educational experiences of gifted graduate students studying gifted education?

Research Design

To explore the phenomena of gifted graduate students who study gifted education, a phenomenological research study (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Moustakas, 1994) was designed to capture qualitative experiences of participants, with a desire for textural richness.

Population Sample

Participants were from a small population phenomenon of gifted graduate students studying gifted education at a private university in a western state in the United States of America. While some of the population does not intend to teach gifted students or stay within the K-12 system, the majority of the population does, which is why they are pursuing Ed.Ds. rather than Ph.Ds.—they want to impact the field of gifted education as practitioners.

A convenience sample of graduate students were invited to complete a recruitment survey which confirmed they were formally or self-identified as gifted and they had taken at least one graduate-level course in gifted education. Eleven eligible participants completed the recruitment survey and eight participants signed consent forms and finished both interviews.

Of the participants, all eight are Education Doctorate students in a Curriculum and Instruction program and are or have been teachers. Seven are specializing in gifted education, hybrid/online cohorts, while another has chosen to take optional gifted education coursework. Seven are female and one is male. Two were identified as gifted in elementary and four received gifted programming in elementary (two did not know they were “gifted”). One self-identified while working with gifted students, one while studying a Masters in Gifted Education, one while working with an advisor and a therapist, and one while studying gifted education in the current doctoral program.

Data Collection and Analysis

Participant experiences were collected in two semi-structured, 45-minute interviews conducted and recorded via Zoom. Transcripts were coded using NVivo, first around the research questions, then for themes that emerged from participant responses. All responses were coded to define a horizon of experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Moustakas, 1994). Themes and quotes were shared with participants for member checking (Creswell & Poth, 2018) to ensure participant experiences were accurately and adequately captured. Themes were also reviewed by a faculty advisor for peer-review.

Participant Quotes



Elementary

“It was nice to be around peers that were similar but I also remember being completely ostracized from the rest of the school”
“My gifted program really was one of the happiest memories that I had of elementary years. Teachers...nurturing creativity and growth and curiosity made...a huge impact”
“I remember my stories being much lengthier...than other students... my teachers were surprised at that”
“...one of our neighbors was identified [but I wasn't]...I always wanted to see the kind of projects she was working on. I desperately wanted to go”
“I spent my entire elementary school years in remedial groups for both reading and math... I would do the homework of the kids in the high groups because they were my friends”



Career Explorers

“I didn't originally become a teacher. I worked in real estate for a decade”
“Bachelor's degree is in English. I didn't do any teacher prep ...I always envisioned myself as potentially a lawyer or something”
“My bachelor's is in International Business with a minor in Spanish. Master's was a teacher ed program and I specialized in elementary education. When I was younger, I never thought that I would be a teacher. I always wanted to be an artist”
“I had a few experiences in high school and college where I was given opportunities to either tutor others or lead classes and deliver content in areas of music”
“I started out as secondary English [but] really wanted to be with the little kids and not with the big kids”



Education Doctorate Students

“The only way to have a real voice in the community, to be able to advocate for kids,...is to have a terminal degree”
“More about having a program that works [with a] gifted lens as well as being a hybrid so that I could do online classes during the school year when I was teaching”
“I decided to do my doctorate in gifted ed because [there will be] good teachers, but there are so few advocates for gifted kids”
“I was in a gifted classroom and wanted to potentially move up in the district...I was looking at [second] masters programs and this program popped up for an Ed.D.”
“There's a lot of Ed.D. [programs], but I really, really, really wanted a gifted-specific degree and...I'm teaching full time”



Secondary

“I feel like I was constantly having meetings with teachers in Middle School...who saw that I had something but I was lazy”
“I went to three high schools and didn't graduate from any of them. I have a GED. I didn't really feel like I fit in anywhere”
“I had a teacher that saw some potential and pushed me, so high school was a lot different. That's when I...started believing that I was smart for the first time”
“[I was] failing classes on purpose, getting a 30 on the ACT, but having a 2.0 GPA...just your typical disengaged student”
“I needed to push myself...I could accomplish more if I were in [AP and honors classes].”
“Great program and great faculty...focused more on ideas and thinking process and curiosity than just teaching to the test”



Mentors

“My teacher at my alma mater called me and said...I'm pretty sure I'm going to leave and I would love for you to be my replacement”
“She's able to converse with me in a way where I don't feel like I'm constantly having to explain where I come from all the time”
“A couple of teachers...helped me to be a better person [and were] always there for any student...so that has led me to want to do the same. But there's also educators who have not done that and negatively impacted me, which made me want to work harder”
“She gave me really good kind of advice. She said, work on getting to know your students”
“We sat and chatted for an hour about Kafka and Camus and Hesse and Joyce and after an hour, [the director of the honors program] said, you're in, get your GED”



Research Interests

“My biggest passion are 2E students”
“Current identification practices and how we can make changes to widen our net”
“Social emotional learning experiences of students as they transition...into college and culturally responsive pedagogy”
“Masking and self harm [of gifted students]”
“Understanding what teachers know about gifted education and the discrepancies that lie between what they know and [do]”
“Historically underserved populations and gifted students living in poverty”
“Post secondary institutions and how they're preparing pre service teachers for meeting the needs of gifted students in a classroom”
“How teachers think about and act on...what they consider to be their job”



College

“I knew that I had to go to college...I loved doing chemistry and economics and Russian lit and it was so exciting every day”
“I was dancing a lot and only took two academic classes per semester...I think I got Cs in all of them, I didn't apply myself at all”
“I was enrolled in some honors coursework my first year, but eventually had to ditch it just because I didn't have credit hour space”
“I thought college was a joke, like way easier than high school...I'm at college, I need to be more challenged. So I left...I've been at four different colleges for undergrad”
“I never got a C on a paper until I went to college. And that like shook me to my core... I didn't actually know that it was possible”
“I don't know that I would have even thought college was an option without my teacher”



Teaching Gifted Students

“I saw how the system was treating my own son and kids who don't fit in the round hole”
“Fell into it...[interned at a] charter school for highly gifted kids. I honestly, at that time, knew very little about gifted”
“I like the challenge of gifted kids and I like seeing them challenged for the first time”
“I saw a gifted class was open and I knew the professor. And literally after the first day of class, my interest sparked. I knew I'm meant to be with gifted students”
“I am drawn to students who really appreciate learning and many have not been the best students in terms of grades and I've always been familiar with that dichotomy”
“My district gave a little stipend for GT teachers. I went through a gifted program. I wondered if it would be a good place for me”



Career Goals

“Hope to eventually be a director, either for a district or for a state and make a wider impact on more students and more teachers”
“Developing meaningful curricula”
“Lead seminars...advocate for gifted students...move up to the district level”
“Support teachers that are either beginning in their career or wanting to develop in the specific area that I am researching and strengthening my expertise in in writing”
“[Teach in] a teacher education program”
“I'd like to be at the district level, potentially overseeing other gifted educators...[but] I don't want to lose my connection with kids”
“Tough as a multipotentialite...go into legislation...speak internationally...work on my developmental theory”

Discussion & Implications

Participants, once they learned they were gifted, experienced self-understanding about their emotional, creative, and learning intensities. Parent advocacy or discouragement had a large impact on the opportunities and goals of participants. Teachers were crucial in referring students for gifted services or remedial services. Mentors who connected intellectually and supported goals were essential for career development.

As educators, past experiences drive participants to replicate their best learning experiences or to do better than their mediocre educational experiences. Many participants expressed not wanting their own gifted and talented students to feel the way they did before they understood what giftedness is and how it impacts their lives. Participants desire to impact students, schools, districts, and policy to support gifted, talented, and all students.

Recommendations

When parents and teachers see learners with gifted characteristics, they must advocate for appropriate learning services to strengthen areas of talent and support areas of challenge. Teachers have a critical responsibility to recognize and serve the academic and affective needs of all students. Education leaders must advocate for comprehensive gifted and talented policies and funding to support equitable implementation. Gifted education programs should thoughtfully consider applicants who may have less-than-A grades and multiple career experiences.

Future Research

To help identify and encourage students toward teaching and researching gifted education, we need further examination of the psychological and experiential characteristics of those who seek to become and excel at being educators of the gifted.

James T. Webb Influence Scholars Program



This project was sponsored and funded by the James T. Webb Influence Scholar program, Office of the Daniel L. Ritchie Endowed Chair of Gifted Education, Morgridge College of Education, University of Denver.

References

Bishop, W. E. (1968). Successful teachers of the gifted. *Exceptional Children, 34*(5), 317–325. <https://doi.org/10.1177/001440296803400502>
Creswell, J. W., & Poth, C. N. (2018). *Qualitative inquiry & research design: Choosing among five approaches* (4th ed.). SAGE Publications.
Moustakas, C. E. (1994). *Phenomenological research methods*. SAGE Publications.
Rosemarin, S. (2014). Should the teacher of the gifted be gifted? *Gifted Education International, 30*(3), 263–270. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0261429413486577>
Skipper, C. E. (1970). Personal attributes of intellectually gifted teacher candidates and their implications for student identification. ERIC Digest.

