

Educating Einstein: Preparing Pre-Service Teachers to Meet the Needs of Gifted Learners

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This presentation is designed to stimulate universities to consider the addition of a course in educating gifted learners, its implementation, and its positive effect on both pre-service teachers and their future students.

In an era where funding for special programs or populations has dwindled, classroom teachers are required to take on more responsibilities. As a result, the education of advanced learners in regular classrooms is the norm. Texas Code requires that any teacher having identified gifted students in the classroom must have at least 30 hours of training. Teachers do have one semester after being hired in which to complete these hours. For a new teacher without preparation, educating advanced learners is not the bright prospect that it might appear initially. These students, who have been underserved due to the assumption that they are able to succeed without intervention, have the intellect, initiative, and innate ability to “take over” the classroom from an inexperienced teacher. Additionally, the many unrecognized gifted, those whose second language or socio-economic status have masked their talents, will remain unidentified. By taking a pre-service course, teachers will be better prepared to assist advanced learners to reach their potential by implementing strategies designed both to engage bright students and to allow for the growth and identification of the hidden gifted.

According to the Texas Definition of Gifted and Talented ...a gifted and talented student means a child or youth who performs at or shows the potential for performing at a remarkably high level of accomplishment when compared to others of the same age, experience, or environment and who:

- Exhibits high performance capability in an intellectual, creative, or artistic area
- Possesses an unusual capacity for leadership
- Excels in a specific academic field

<http://www.statutes.legis.state.tx.us/Docs/ED/htm/ED.29.htm#29.121>

This definition helps to pinpoint the different areas in which a student might show precocious abilities. Pre-service teachers need to learn the various aspects of the gifted and talented student that are recognized by the state of Texas. They also need to be made aware that many of the gifted are “invisible,” hiding their talents, either intentionally or unintentionally, so knowledge of identifying characteristics is essential.

Within the 30 foundation hours required by the state of Texas, there are five areas that must to be addressed with a minimum of six hours of training each: nature and needs, identification and assessment, social and emotional characteristics, creativity and instructional strategies, and a differentiated curriculum. These areas form the core of a university instructional course. A topic outline might be as follows:

1. Nature and Needs of G/T Learners
 - Gifted Education: Matching Instruction with Needs
 - Characteristics of Gifted Students
2. Identification and Assessment
 - Identifying Gifted and Talented Students
 - Program Planning
 - Acceleration
3. Differentiated Curriculum
 - Grouping, Differentiation, and Enrichment
 - Curriculum Models
4. Creativity and Instructional Strategies
 - The Creative Person, Creative Process, and Creative Dramatics
 - Teaching for Creative Growth
 - Teaching Thinking Skills
5. Social and Emotional Needs
 - Leadership, Affective Learning, and Character Education
 - Understanding Gifted Students

Only six states mandate and fully fund gifted education. Texas is one of 22 states that mandate education of the gifted but do not fully fund it. <http://www.nagc.org/> Consequently, it is the district initiatives, and ultimately each individual teacher, that make the difference for the child with advanced learning capabilities. As a result, education of the gifted varies widely in Texas with the Texas State Plan for the Gifted serving as a guide for the districts. <http://www.tea.state.tx.us/index2.aspx?id=6420>

A law having a more wide-ranging effect, the NCLB Act of 2001, targeted low achievement and has been successful in narrowing the gap, but research has shown that top pupils have languished academically with insignificant gains. Teachers have felt pressured to focus on their lowest achieving students rather than their students with high potential. Pre-service teachers need to be taught strategies to assist in balancing instruction through grouping, differentiation, and enrichment in this era of high stakes testing.

As with any other special population, a major concern is matching instruction with needs. Pre-service teachers benefit from explicit instruction in how to teach advanced learners in their general education classroom. The Texas Performance Standards Project <http://www.texaspsp.org/> provides sample units to be used in different grade levels and has been instituted in various districts on a voluntary basis in the past few years. This initiative, and other curricular models such as tiered instruction, assists pre-service teachers to understand how to realistically plan for the needs of the gifted.

A university implementing a course in gifted learners may wish to work in conjunction with the Texas Association for the Gifted and Talented (TAGT) <http://txgifted.org/> in arranging for pre-service teachers to receive a TAGT level I Awareness Certificate which indicates that the participant has completed 45 clock hours of approved Teacher Professional Development, which exceeds the 30 hours requirement set by the state. TAGT can also be utilized to familiarize pre-service teachers with resources available for Texas teachers.

Ultimately, a course designed to acquaint pre-service teachers with the characteristics and learning needs of their most apt pupils is essential for assisting them to be able to best serve this unique population. Educational equity, by definition, should encompass all students, even the Einsteins.