

## **Teacher Training**

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***Encyclopedia of Giftedness, Creativity, and Talent. (2009) Sage Publications. 2:884-887***

Teacher training may be perceived as somewhat of an intangible construct because it presumes to cover a lot of ground, takes on many forms, and pertains to different kinds of participants. There are teachers from preschool through graduate studies; in homes, resource centers, schools and alternative educational settings; in various stages of professional careers; and in the throes of juggling many administrative, instructional, learning, and other kinds of responsibilities. As understandings evolve as to the magnitude of who teaches, and what teaching encompasses, so too, do our understandings broaden as to the training that is necessary in order to do the job (in all its multifaceted complexity) *well*. Training is a word that implies learning and development in any number of capacities, personal and professional, but given the breath of whom and what is at issue with respect to training processes within an educational framework, it is impossible to detail all the elements here. Suffice it then to specify the two predominant types of teacher training thrusts (preservice and inservice) and many important aspects and considerations involved therein, and as they apply to gifted education.

### **Initial Teacher Training**

*Preservice training* is designed for individuals who have chosen to embark upon the teaching profession. This training for certification generally includes work that addresses theoretical perspectives, pedagogical practice, and educational psychology (such as the study of cognitive development, identity formation, strategies for classroom management, and suitable means of fostering and sustaining motivation). There is a practicum component to preservice education whereby teacher candidates learn “on the job” and receive feedback from experienced associates. Prospective teachers are encouraged to share their various learning experiences with their colleagues-in-training through discussion, meaningful activities, and online venues. Preservice offerings may or may not have a special education thrust, an umbrella under which the “gifted exceptionality” would likely fall. The amount of attention directly paid to gifted learning needs is highly variable from one preservice program and geographical locale to the next, although much of the literature in the field of gifted education argues for more, better, and appropriately targeted training provision in gifted-related matters. Initial teacher training programs often focus on subject-specific domains grounded in curricular requirements at various grade levels; prescribed standards of practice; familiarity with current research findings and resource materials; assessment procedures; relevant legislative matters; and how to facilitate a good learner-learning match for all students. Professionalism, a solid grasp of principles underlying learning and teaching, and an appreciation of diversity in context and how best to address it, are the cornerstones of

such programs. Some preservice programs are longer than others, and they can range from a minimum of 10 months of training through to several years depending on the selected program of study. If there is particular focus, such as gifted education, then the course would be geared to pertinent material so as to better equip teachers to address the needs of the target population. Ideally, those who provide this training are current, knowledgeable, and master teachers in their own right—effectively trained to train effectively. There are post-graduate level certification and advanced degree programs in place for educators who wish to take on this sort of leadership role—and some teacher trainers will have been exposed to a rather generalized orientation with respect to topics such as child development, and how to differentiate for exceptionalities, whereas others will have received more of a gifted focus.

### **Teacher Training for Experienced Educators**

*Inservice training* is designed for practicing educators. Whereas preservice training provides the fuel and momentum required to become an effective teacher, inservice training replenishes and sustains it. Training often takes the form of professional development sessions, one or more specifically targeted presentations, or additional qualification or degree courses that are formally offered through colleges and universities. It may also involve consultation; reflection; hands-on group activities; case study work; visitations and careful observation; documentation and analysis of current practice; and action research. There are sometimes grants available for research and advanced training initiatives. Some teachers go on sabbatical, others take time off to extend their knowledge base in the field of education, many continue to work in classrooms. Like its preservice counterpart, inservice training is variable in design, extent, and the nature of core elements. For example, training might focus on enhancing and/or honing educators' pedagogical, technological, or communication skills, inquiry-based processes, or the application of specialized procedures. Generally speaking, teachers learn how to better identify and address learning problems; develop curriculum and instruction; acquire a foundation of information on a range of strategies for appropriately responsive teaching; and engage in collaborative practices in and beyond schools. This, in turn, makes them stronger in an ever-changing educational environment, enabling them to contribute more meaningfully to the learning community while raising the bar for others. At the same time, teacher training reinforces the importance of continued, constructive, and collegial learning for students, and because it requires time, commitment, and effort this, too, sends a positive message to youngsters. The nature of inservice training tends to be flexible and fluid, and commonly boils down to whatever a particular individual, group, administrative body, or school district deems important to its optimal functioning at any point in time. However, it builds from two premises: that teachers have a basic understanding of educational theory and of what underlies best practice, and that their participation in the training process is predicated on a desire to improve, update, and evaluate what they do. Teacher training moves in different directions from there, sometimes formal and sometimes informal in nature, with learning opportunities more or less available depending upon such factors as accessibility, funding, demand, need, and even whim.

## **Teaching Training in Gifted Education**

Teacher training in gifted education may or may not be part of the short-term or overall professional development plan for any one person, department, school, or district. Far too often things “gifted” do not rank high on a priority list, and many administrators do not consider it essential in the light of numerous other competing issues and demands for limited time and educational funding allocations. However, it is important for teachers to recognize the importance of gifted issues, for administrators to do their part to promote increased understanding about high-level development, and for parents to advocate for their highly able children. This could have a strong and advantageous effect on the teacher training impetus, increasing the availability and caliber of professional development offerings on giftedness. As it is, the paucity of teachers actually receiving training in gifted education is problematic, especially when one considers that there are so many high-ability learners who are going unrecognized, and whose diverse learning needs are not being met. When teachers are offered and choose to avail themselves of opportunities to think constructively about giftedness and issues pertaining to high-level development, and to develop sound approaches for working with exceptional learners—and when they are administratively supported in this regard—the system and everyone in it stands to benefit.

There are many fine ways in which new and seasoned educators can access teacher training, collaboratively or independently. Several associations, college faculties, and university affiliated organizations disseminate information about giftedness, thereby heightening awareness and promoting the appropriate address of exceptional learners’ needs. Teachers can form study groups, partner with professional networks (industry, business committees, corporations), and enroll in distance education programs. There are professional consultants who make it their business to criss-cross the world offering teacher training programs in gifted-related topics ranging from social emotional concerns; talent development; subject-specific curriculum; differentiated programming models; identification procedures; and so on. There are countless resources available online, at book stores, and in conference exhibit halls, and one can also access gifted chat rooms, advocacy organizations, and lectures on gifted-related topics of interest. Although teacher training for certification purposes is generally structured by an overseeing body in accordance with set standards, teacher training for the sake of professional growth—designed to help one become a more competent and effective educator—is, as noted at the outset, an evolving and both a personal and professional endeavor.

The field of gifted education is now formally recognized as having its own training standards as approved by the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE) in the United States. These standards outline many specific areas of knowledge and skill requirements, and focus on important matters such as diversity, assessment features, instructional strategies, and collaborative endeavors. At the same time, there is an emphasis on the importance of coursework, clinical practice, and field experience among teacher candidates in gifted education at both the undergraduate and graduate levels, and among more experienced teachers, as well. Targeted resource material that represents research-based and standards-based practices in gifted education is increasingly available for use by professors, course developers, accreditation coordinators, and professional development leaders, and use of these resources helps

build coherence and ensure educational quality across programs, districts, and countries. Two guidebooks of particular note are *Gifted Education Standards for University Teacher Preparation Programs* and *Using the National Gifted Education Standards for PreK-12 Professional Development*.

### **Conclusion**

The nature of any teacher training offered and the challenges of the learning process itself will vary from one trainer, teacher, context, and area of focus to the next. There is much more to teaching than the day-to-day goings-on in any given classroom, school or other educational setting. Regular, appropriately designed, and effectively delivered training is essential for teachers so they can consolidate and build upon their understandings, develop the tools and the competences they need to address diversity in today's student population, and support and champion lifelong learning.

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### **Further Readings on Teacher Training**

**Book:** Dettmar, P. & Landrum, M. (Eds.) (1998). *Staff development: The key to effective gifted education programs*. Waco, TX: Prufrock Press

**Book:** Johnsen, S.; VanTassel-Baska, J.; & Robinson, A. (2008). *Gifted education standards for university teacher preparation programs*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press.

**Book:** Kitano, M.; Montgomery, D.; VanTassel-Baska, J.; & Johnsen, S. (2008). *Using the national gifted education standards for preK-12 professional development*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press.

**Book:** Landrum, M. S.; Callahan, C. M.; & Shaklee, B.D. (Eds.). (2001) *Aiming for excellence: Annotations to the NAGC pre-K-grade 12 gifted program standard*. Waco, TX: Prufrock Press.

**Chapter in a Book:** Matthews, D. J. & Foster, J.F. (2005). Teacher development. In *Being smart about gifted children: A guidebook for parents and educators*. (p.337-362) Scottsdale, AZ: Great Potential Press.

**Electronic Document:** National Association for Gifted Children [www.nagc.org](http://www.nagc.org) NAGC Standards: Professional development. Retrieved Sept. 15, 2008.

### **See also:**

Competencies for teachers of gifted; Effective teaching; Preservice education; Professional development