Educating gifted and talented students:
From teachers’ thinking to thinking teachers

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This thesis is presented for the degree of
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Declaration

I declare that this thesis is my own account of my research and contains as its main content work which has not been previously submitted for a degree at any tertiary educational institution.

Haw Hwa Tan
Abstract

To bring about a transformation in the provision of a meaningful education for gifted and talented students in regular classrooms, teachers need to develop a critical awareness about equity as ‘needs-based’ and address the ‘taken for grantedness’ of perceptions about giftedness and practices. It is argued that when teachers’ thinking about equity, giftedness, gifted and talented students is changed first, their critical pedagogy will transform the status quo of gifted and talented education in regular classrooms. This thesis outlines research that examines the ways teachers think about giftedness and the education of gifted and talented students in regular classrooms in Western Australian primary schools and explores the circumstances in which teachers’ thinking transforms individual teachers into ‘thinking teachers’. A qualitative research approach with an emergent design and a critical interpretivist research paradigm grounded in Paulo Freire’s perspective of critical consciousness was utilised to understand teachers’ thinking. Twenty classroom teachers with different ethnic backgrounds and teaching experiences in both public and private primary schools were recruited through planned and snowball sampling. In-depth open ended face to face interviews were conducted with individual participants between December 2009 and July 2010 to find out what they thought about giftedness and the education of gifted and talented students. The recursive model of interviewing was used as the method for collecting data.

My overarching research question is: What do teachers think about giftedness and the education of gifted and talented students? My two specific research questions are: How does teachers’ thinking affect their conceptualisations of giftedness, gifted
and talented students and their work in regular classrooms? Under what circumstances does teachers’ thinking change them into ‘thinking teachers’? Within the context of this study, ‘thinking teachers’ are conceptualised as those who reflect on why they are doing what they are doing, evaluate how they do what needs to be done and become empowered to transform the status quo and unsuitable teaching practices to provide a meaningful education to every student.

The findings suggested that individual participants were at different stages in the process of becoming ‘thinking teachers’. Participation in this study provided an opportunity for participants to examine more closely their ideas, beliefs and opinions about equity, giftedness, gifted and talented students and to reflect meaningfully about how they worked with those students. Despite their different perspectives of giftedness, all the participants acknowledged that giftedness is an above average ability to demonstrate an outstanding performance. There was a concern among many participants that certain teachers did not make any provisions for the gifted students in their regular classrooms. The findings also uncovered the notion of equity as equality (a concept based on sameness and equal shares) and a ‘taken for grantedness’ of perceptions about giftedness which affected both the participants’ identification of gifted and talented students and teaching practices.

This study concludes that stakeholders such as teachers, school principals, policy makers, Department of Education and teachers’ educational institutions need to bring about a transformation in the thinking of teachers to dispel misconceptions of giftedness and talent. Governments and the community need to support teachers with the resources and funds for teacher education and professional development in gifted education as well as gifted programs.
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