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The Critical Role of Classroom Teachers in Gifted Education

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Abstract: Classroom teachers play a critical role in the identification, instruction, and educational development of gifted and talented learners. Despite decades of research emphasizing the importance of teacher knowledge and preparation, misconceptions regarding giftedness, limited understanding of identification procedures, and inconsistent implementation of differentiated instruction continue to present challenges. This article examines the essential role of classroom teachers in effective gifted education programming through a review of historical and contemporary research, supplemented by findings from previously conducted classroom teacher interviews. Particular attention is given to teachers' perceptions of gifted characteristics, knowledge of identification procedures, understanding of appropriate curriculum and instructional practices, and opportunities for collaboration with gifted education specialists. The discussion emphasizes the importance of recognizing gifted potential across diverse student populations, including twice-exceptional learners and students whose abilities may not be reflected in traditional measures of academic achievement. Research supports the need for systematic, sustained professional development that extends beyond traditional inservice training to include instructional modeling, collaborative planning, mentoring, and ongoing professional support. Recommendations are presented for strengthening partnerships among classroom teachers, gifted education specialists, and school administrators. Ultimately, effective gifted education requires a shared commitment to professional preparation, equitable identification, differentiated instruction, and the continuous development of exceptional student potential.

Keywords: *Gifted Education, Classroom Teachers, Professional Development, Gifted Identification, Differentiated Instruction, Collaboration, Teacher Perceptions.*

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I. INTRODUCTION

The identification and education of gifted and talented learners have remained important topics of educational research, policy, and professional practice for decades. Although gifted education programs have evolved in their identification practices, instructional approaches, and service delivery models, one essential component has remained constant: the classroom teacher. Regardless of the availability or structure of specialized gifted education services, classroom teachers maintain significant responsibility for recognizing exceptional potential, providing appropriate instructional opportunities, and supporting the academic development of advanced learners. Consequently, the effectiveness of gifted education cannot be determined solely by the quality of specialized programming; it must also be considered within the broader context of general classroom instruction.

Historically, researchers have expressed concern regarding classroom teachers' understanding of giftedness and their preparation to meet the educational needs of gifted learners (Bigelow, 1993; Bransky, 1987; Milligan, 2001; Tomlinson, 2001). These concerns have included limited recognition of gifted characteristics, misconceptions regarding student abilities and behaviors, insufficient knowledge of identification procedures, and inadequate implementation of differentiated instructional practices. Although considerable attention has been directed toward improving gifted education services, contemporary research indicates that many of these longstanding challenges persist (Lutz et al., 2025; Townend et al., 2024).

The importance of classroom teacher preparation extends beyond the ability to recognize students who demonstrate exceptional academic achievement. Giftedness may be expressed through advanced reasoning, creative problem-solving, intellectual curiosity, leadership, exceptional talent, or other characteristics that do not consistently correspond with high grades or conventional classroom behaviors. Teachers who maintain narrow perceptions of giftedness may inadvertently overlook students whose exceptional potential is less readily apparent. This concern is particularly significant for twice-exceptional learners and students from culturally, linguistically, and economically diverse backgrounds (Cody et al., 2022). Therefore, comprehensive teacher preparation must address both the diverse manifestations of giftedness and the

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instructional practices necessary to support students with advanced learning needs.

Equally important is the relationship between classroom teachers and gifted education specialists. Specialized programs may provide enrichment, acceleration, and other advanced learning opportunities; however, gifted learners continue to spend substantial portions of their instructional day in general education classrooms. Without meaningful collaboration, communication, and coordinated instructional planning, the benefits of specialized programming may not extend effectively into students' daily educational experiences. Research examining differentiated instruction and professional development reinforces the importance of providing teachers with practical knowledge, instructional support, and sustained opportunities for professional growth (Kahmann et al., 2022; VanTassel-Baska et al., 2020).

The purpose of this article is to examine the critical role of classroom teachers in gifted education, with particular emphasis on three areas: understanding the characteristics of gifted learners, participating effectively in identification procedures, and providing appropriate curriculum and differentiated instruction. Historical findings from classroom teacher interviews are considered alongside contemporary research to illustrate continuing challenges and opportunities for improvement. Additionally, the article explores the importance of collaboration between classroom teachers and gifted education specialists and offers practical recommendations for developing systematic professional learning experiences. Central to this discussion is the premise that effective gifted education is a shared educational responsibility requiring informed classroom teachers, knowledgeable specialists, and committed instructional leadership.

- *Classroom Teachers' Role*

Classroom teachers play an essential role in the identification, instruction, and academic success of gifted learners. Effective gifted education programs depend not only on specialized services but also on the knowledge, attitudes, and instructional practices of classroom teachers who interact with students throughout the school day.

Early research consistently indicated that classroom teachers demonstrated greater support for gifted education programming when they possessed a clearer understanding of giftedness and the educational needs of gifted learners (Bigelow, 1993; Bransky, 1987; Milligan, 2001; Tomlinson, 2001). Conversely, limited knowledge of gifted characteristics, identification procedures, and appropriate instructional services often created barriers to collaboration and effective program implementation.

These concerns remain relevant. A systematic literature review conducted by Townend et al. (2024) emphasized the continuing need for professional development that strengthens teachers' knowledge, instructional competencies, and confidence in meeting the needs of gifted students. Similarly, Lutz et al. (2025) identified persistent gaps in the attention given to gifted education within general teacher preparation literature.

It seems the trend spans over almost four decades as Starko (1990) examined the experiences of teachers selected to provide enrichment and acceleration services to gifted learners. Despite being chosen for their creativity, enthusiasm, or perceived instructional abilities, the teachers reported inadequate preparation and limited understanding of gifted education. One participant explained, "I knew nothing. I had no preparation. Nobody sent me anywhere. Nobody gave me any clues" (p. 35). These findings illustrate an important principle: Enthusiasm and instructional effectiveness, while valuable, cannot replace specialized knowledge and professional preparation.

Classroom teachers' perceptions of giftedness also influence student identification, instructional decisions, and attitudes toward gifted education services. Hickey (1990) surveyed 27 teachers concerning problems associated with gifted programming. Participants identified concerns involving instructional interruptions caused by pull-out services, conflicting definitions of giftedness, perceptions of arrogance among participating students, and beliefs regarding the effects of ability grouping on other learners.

Hickey also reported that teachers lacking gifted education training were less likely to differentiate classroom instruction for gifted students.

More recent research reinforces these concerns. VanTassel-Baska et al. (2020), examining differentiated instruction across multiple school districts, found that both general classroom teachers and teachers of gifted students frequently underutilized differentiated practices or failed to align those practices effectively with instructional purposes.

Collaboration provides one avenue for addressing these challenges. In a study by Milligan and Campbell (2003), teachers participating in a summer program for gifted students reported positive outcomes from collaborative planning, communication, and team teaching. Participants described the development of professional camaraderie, shared responsibility, and increased confidence. Collaborative planning extended beyond the division of instructional responsibilities to include shared decision-making and professional growth.

Collectively, these findings suggest that effective gifted education depends upon two interconnected priorities: developing classroom teachers' understanding of giftedness and establishing meaningful partnerships between classroom teachers and gifted education specialists.

- *Classroom Teachers' Knowledge of Giftedness*

During graduate candidates pursuing master's degrees in gifted education conducted interviews with classroom teachers as part of their professional preparation (Milligan, 2019). The purpose of these interviews was to examine teachers' knowledge and perceptions in three areas:

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- Characteristics of gifted learners.
- Identification procedures used within their school districts.
- Curriculum and instructional strategies appropriate for gifted learners.

The interview findings provided valuable insight into areas in which classroom teachers could benefit from additional information, collaboration, and professional development.

Although these findings are historical and should not be generalized beyond the participating teachers without additional methodological information, they illustrate concerns that remain relevant to current gifted education practice.

➢ *Characteristics of Gifted Learners*

Analysis of the interviews indicated that 89% of the classroom teachers described gifted students primarily as individuals who earned high grades, demonstrated strong motivation, worked independently, and displayed outgoing personalities.

While these characteristics may describe some gifted learners, they do not represent the full range of giftedness.

Students demonstrating exceptional intellectual, creative, or academic potential do not necessarily exhibit consistently high achievement or behaviors traditionally associated with successful students. Some may experience academic underachievement, learning disabilities, motivational difficulties, or other factors that prevent their abilities from being readily recognized.

Particularly important are students identified as twice-exceptional, whose advanced abilities coexist with disabilities or learning differences, as well as students from populations historically underrepresented in gifted education. Cody et al. (2022) examined classroom teachers' beliefs about twice-exceptional students and students from culturally, linguistically, and economically diverse populations. Their research highlights the importance of examining teacher perceptions and ensuring that professional learning addresses the characteristics and instructional needs of diverse gifted learners.

Another notable finding from the interviews concerned perceptions of creativity. Teachers who identified creativity as an indicator of giftedness frequently associated it with artistic ability, particularly drawing and visual arts (Milligan, 2019). Although artistic talent may reflect exceptional creative ability, creativity is not limited to artistic expression. Gifted learners may demonstrate creativity through original problem-solving, innovative thinking, unconventional approaches to assignments, advanced questioning, or the ability to generate multiple solutions to complex problems.

When classroom teachers associate giftedness exclusively with academic achievement or creativity exclusively with artistic production, potentially gifted students whose strengths are expressed differently may be overlooked. Recent research suggests that misconceptions about giftedness continue to influence educators' understanding of gifted learners. Ercan and Ziegler (2025) examined misconceptions among preservice teachers, practicing teachers, and university educators, emphasizing the importance of sustained professional preparation responsive to educators' roles and experiences.

The implications are clear: Classroom teachers need opportunities to examine traditional assumptions about giftedness and develop a broader understanding of how exceptional potential may be demonstrated.

➢ *Identification Procedures*

Another important finding (Milligan, 2019) concerned classroom teachers' understanding of gifted identification procedures. Only 15% of the teachers interviewed reported an understanding of the identification processes used within their districts. Those demonstrating greater knowledge had generally participated previously on identification committees. These teachers were more familiar with assessment instruments, evaluation criteria, and procedures used to determine eligibility for gifted education services.

This finding raises an important question: How can classroom teachers participate effectively in identifying gifted potential when they have not been adequately informed about the procedures and criteria used in the identification process? When gifted identification relied heavily on standardized intelligence and achievement measures, students with potential have been overlooked. Although these instruments continue to provide useful information, contemporary approaches emphasize the consideration of multiple sources of evidence and the recognition of potential that may not be reflected in traditional academic performance.

Performance-based evidence may include classroom observations, student products, demonstrations of advanced reasoning, creative problem-solving, and other indicators of exceptional ability.

Classroom teachers occupy a particularly valuable position in this process because they observe students across instructional settings and over extended periods.

However, the ability to recognize potentially gifted behaviors should not be assumed. Teachers need guidance in identifying relevant characteristics, documenting evidence, understanding referral procedures, and distinguishing exceptional potential from conventional indicators of classroom success. Peters et al. (2021) discussed the use of local norms as one approach to identifying students who require advanced academic opportunities. Their work underscores the importance of examining identification practices and considering students' abilities within appropriate educational contexts.

Likewise, the National Association for Gifted Children (NAGC, 2019) emphasizes comprehensive assessment

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practices that draw upon multiple sources of information and support equitable access to gifted education services. Classroom teacher nominations can contribute valuable information to this process; however, they should function as one component of a comprehensive identification system rather than serving as the sole avenue for student consideration. Professional development should therefore address both the teacher's role in recognizing gifted potential and the broader assessment procedures used to determine appropriate educational services.

➢ *Curriculum and Instructional Practices for Gifted Learners*

The interviews (Milligan, 2019) also revealed limited awareness of the curriculum and instructional frameworks used in gifted education programs. Only 8% of participating classroom teachers reported familiarity with the gifted education frameworks used by gifted education facilitators for program planning and instruction. Approximately 12% reported implementing differentiated instructional strategies specifically intended to meet the needs of gifted, talented, or creative learners.

These findings are particularly concerning when considering the amount of instructional time gifted students spend in general education classrooms.

For example, in a pull-out program providing three hours of specialized instruction weekly, gifted students continue receiving most of their academic instruction from classroom teachers. Consequently, the effectiveness of gifted programming cannot be measured solely by what occurs during specialized instruction.

The general classroom must also provide appropriate opportunities for intellectual challenge, advanced content, critical thinking, creativity, and academic growth.

Differentiation does not simply mean assigning additional work to students who complete tasks quickly. Rather, effective differentiation involves adjusting the depth, complexity, pace, content, or learning experiences to address students' demonstrated readiness and instructional needs.

VanTassel-Baska et al. (2020) identified continuing challenges with the effective implementation of differentiated practices. Their findings reinforce the need for professional learning that moves beyond awareness of differentiation to the purposeful selection and application of appropriate instructional strategies.

Additionally, Kahmann et al. (2022), in a meta-analysis of professional development focused on differentiated instruction, reported improvements in teachers' knowledge, attitudes, and instructional practices. Their findings also suggested that professional development connected to specific subject areas was particularly beneficial for teachers' implementation of differentiation. These studies reinforce the importance of providing classroom teachers with practical tools, instructional models, planning assistance, and ongoing opportunities to refine their practices.

➢ *Conclusions Drawn from Classroom Teacher Interviews*

Several important conclusions emerged from the 2017–2019 classroom teacher interviews.

- First, traditional perceptions of giftedness may contribute to the under-recognition of gifted potential. Classroom teachers frequently associated giftedness with high grades, motivation, and positive classroom behaviors. Although these characteristics may be present among gifted learners, reliance on them may overlook students whose abilities are expressed through less conventional patterns of achievement or behavior.
- Second, direct participation in identification procedures appears to increase teachers' familiarity with the process. Teachers who previously served on identification committees demonstrated greater understanding of assessment instruments, selection criteria, and placement procedures. Providing opportunities for rotating membership on identification committees, where permitted by district policies, may help broaden professional understanding while maintaining the consistency and expertise necessary for sound decisions.
- Third, classroom teachers may have limited awareness of the curriculum and instructional expectations established for gifted learners. Gifted education specialists should regularly share curriculum frameworks, instructional goals, and differentiated teaching strategies with classroom teachers. Collaborative planning can create opportunities to connect gifted education objectives with general classroom instruction without diminishing the advanced learning experiences required by gifted students.These conclusions point to a central recommendation: Effective gifted education requires intentional, sustained professional learning and meaningful collaboration between classroom teachers and gifted education specialists.

➢ *Educating Classroom Teachers Through Professional Development*

Professional development is an essential component of effective gifted education programming. Early research by Bangel et al. (2006) demonstrated the benefits of structured preparation experiences for preservice teachers working with gifted learners. Participants who completed a gifted education practicum reported increased understanding, preparation, confidence, and readiness to provide appropriate instruction.

Contemporary research continues to support the importance of teacher preparation and sustained professional learning.

Townend et al. (2024), in their systematic literature review, identified several characteristics of effective professional development in gifted education, including evidence-based content, sustained engagement, collaboration, mentoring, opportunities for instructional application, and support from school leadership.

Cheung et al. (2022) examined a professional development initiative involving primary and secondary educators in Hong Kong. Their findings provided preliminary

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support for the effectiveness of professional learning in improving teachers' knowledge of gifted education and their understanding of instructional strategies appropriate for gifted students.

Together, these studies suggest that professional development should not be viewed as an isolated workshop or a one-time presentation. Instead, it should be an ongoing process that increases teacher knowledge, strengthens instructional practice, and provides opportunities for continuous professional growth.

A comprehensive professional development plan for gifted education should include:

- Foundational knowledge: Developing teachers' understanding of gifted characteristics, diverse manifestations of giftedness, and the academic and social-emotional needs of gifted learners.
- Identification procedures: Providing guidance in referral processes, assessment instruments, performance-based evidence, and equitable identification practices.
- Curriculum and instruction: Demonstrating appropriate differentiation, enrichment, acceleration, flexible grouping, and advanced instructional strategies.
- Collaborative planning: Establishing opportunities for classroom teachers and gifted education specialists to develop instructional plans, share resources, and address student needs.
- Instructional support: Providing demonstration lessons, coaching, mentoring, classroom consultation, and opportunities for professional feedback.
- Ongoing evaluation: Assessing the influence of professional learning on teacher knowledge, classroom practices, student opportunities, and program effectiveness.

The NAGC's *2019 Pre-K–Grade 12 Gifted Programming Standards* provide a framework for effective programming, including professional learning. The Council for Exceptional Children and NAGC's (2024) professional preparation standards also reinforce the need for specialized knowledge, ethical practice, collaboration, and continued professional growth among educators serving gifted learners.

Although gifted education specialists possess expertise that positions them to provide instructional guidance, responsibility for professional development should be shared with school and district administrators. Effective implementation requires administrative commitment, adequate resources, scheduled collaboration, and sustained support.

➢ *Moving Beyond Traditional Inservice Training*

Inservice training has long been a familiar component of professional development in education. However, not all professional development experiences produce meaningful changes in teacher knowledge or classroom practice.

Traditional presentations may increase awareness of gifted education, but awareness alone does not guarantee effective instructional implementation. Teachers benefit from opportunities to actively participate, examine authentic classroom situations, observe effective instructional practices, and apply newly acquired knowledge to their own teaching responsibilities.

Research on differentiated instruction indicates that professional learning must be connected to actual classroom practice and evaluated for its effects. Kahmann et al. (2022) found that professional development improved teacher outcomes, although improvements in student learning were not consistently demonstrated across the studies examined.

This distinction is important. Successful professional development should be evaluated not only according to participants' satisfaction or increased confidence but also through evidence of changes in instructional practices and educational opportunities for students.

Professional development in gifted education should therefore incorporate classroom demonstrations, collaborative lesson development, instructional coaching, follow-up consultation, and reflection.

➢ *Practical Suggestions for Communicating the Needs of Gifted Learners*

Gifted education specialists can use regularly scheduled faculty meetings, professional learning communities, and other collaborative opportunities to expand classroom teachers' knowledge of giftedness. Even brief professional development experiences can be valuable when they are purposeful, interactive, and connected to teachers' instructional responsibilities.

Several practices may strengthen these experiences.

- Make professional learning interactive. Begin with a brief activity in which teachers identify characteristics they associate with gifted learners. Invite participants to share their responses and consider whether their descriptions include students who underachieve, display exceptional creativity, experience learning disabilities, or demonstrate advanced potential in less conventional ways.
- Keep presentations focused and practical. Rather than overwhelming teachers with technical explanations of assessment instruments or administrative procedures, emphasize information directly relevant to classroom observations, referrals, and instructional planning.
- Encourage reflection and discussion. Present classroom scenarios and ask teachers to consider which students might demonstrate gifted potential and what additional evidence would be useful.
- Provide instructional resources. Share differentiated lesson examples, observation tools, referral guidelines, and curriculum resources that teachers can readily incorporate into classroom practice.
- Invite teacher contributions. Encourage classroom teachers to offer suggestions for improving identification procedures, instructional strategies, and collaboration between general and gifted education programs.

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- Maintain ongoing professional relationships. Conclude professional learning experiences by emphasizing the availability of gifted education specialists for consultation, instructional support, and collaborative problem-solving.

Perhaps most importantly, professional development should communicate that classroom teachers are respected and valued partners in the gifted education process.

➢ *The Positive Influence of Systematic Professional Development*

The importance of sustained professional learning was demonstrated in a study by Milligan (2001), which examined the influence of a yearlong professional development initiative at an elementary school. Following participation in a systematic plan of professional development related to giftedness, each participating teacher in grades K–4 modified some aspect of her understanding or definition of giftedness. Additionally, each teacher increased the number of students nominated for gifted identification assessment.

The professional development initiative included demonstration lessons presented by the gifted education facilitator and four formal inservice sessions involving multiple presenters.

These findings suggest that repeated exposure to information, instructional modeling, and collaborative learning opportunities can influence teachers' understanding and identification practices.

It is important, however, to distinguish increased nominations from more accurate identification. Additional assessment data would be necessary to determine whether changes in nomination practices resulted in more equitable or appropriate identification decisions.

Contemporary research provides further perspective. Townend et al. (2024) emphasized that sustained, collaborative professional learning supported by mentoring and administrative resources is particularly important for promoting meaningful instructional development.

Similarly, Lutz et al. (2025) identified a continuing need for greater attention to gifted education within teacher preparation research and practice.

These findings demonstrate that the need for well-prepared classroom teachers has not diminished. Instead, current expectations for differentiation, equitable identification, inclusive instruction, and individualized student support make professional preparation increasingly important.

➢ *Strengthening Gifted Education Through Collaboration*

The success of gifted education programming depends upon far more than the availability of specialized services. It requires a coordinated effort among classroom teachers, gifted education specialists, and educational leaders who share responsibility for recognizing and developing exceptional potential.

Classroom teachers are instrumental in observing student characteristics, contributing to identification procedures, providing differentiated instruction, and reinforcing advanced learning opportunities throughout the academic day.

Yet these responsibilities cannot be fulfilled effectively without appropriate knowledge, professional resources, and ongoing instructional support.

Gifted education specialists serve an essential role as instructional leaders, consultants, collaborators, and advocates. Through systematic professional development, demonstration lessons, collaborative planning, and continuous communication, they can strengthen classroom teachers' understanding of giftedness and improve the coordination of educational services.

School and district leaders must likewise ensure that teachers have the time, resources, and professional learning opportunities necessary to fulfill these responsibilities.

Ultimately, effective gifted education is not the responsibility of one teacher, specialist, or program. It is the result of a collaborative professional commitment to recognizing exceptional potential and providing appropriately challenging educational experiences. When classroom teachers are knowledgeable, supported, and actively involved in gifted education, opportunities increase for all gifted learners to be recognized, challenged, and supported in reaching their potential.

II. CONCLUSION

The critical role of classroom teachers in gifted education has been recognized in professional literature for decades, yet the challenges associated with teacher knowledge, perceptions, and instructional preparation remain relevant. Historical research and contemporary studies consistently emphasize that effective gifted education requires more than the identification of exceptional learners and the provision of specialized services. It requires classroom teachers who understand the diverse characteristics of giftedness, recognize indicators of exceptional potential, participate knowledgeably in identification procedures, and provide appropriately challenging instructional experiences throughout the school day.

The classroom teacher interviews discussed in this article provide a historical illustration of challenges related to recognizing gifted characteristics, understanding identification procedures, and implementing differentiated instructional practices. When considered alongside contemporary research, these findings reinforce the importance of examining persistent misconceptions and strengthening professional preparation. Particularly significant is the need to recognize gifted potential among

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students whose abilities may not be reflected in traditional indicators of academic success. Expanding teachers' understanding of giftedness is essential to creating more equitable opportunities for identification and appropriate educational services.

Professional development represents one of the most practical and potentially influential means of addressing these needs. However, meaningful professional growth requires more than occasional workshops or isolated presentations. Sustained professional learning should incorporate research-based information, instructional demonstrations, collaborative planning, opportunities for classroom application, and continuing feedback and support. Gifted education specialists are uniquely positioned to facilitate these experiences by serving as instructional leaders, consultants, mentors, and advocates. Their effectiveness, however, depends upon supportive school leadership and meaningful partnerships with classroom teachers.

Ultimately, the responsibility for educating gifted and talented learners cannot rest exclusively with the gifted education specialist or the specialized program. It must be embraced as a collaborative commitment shared by classroom teachers, specialists, administrators, and other educational stakeholders. As schools continue to address increasingly diverse student populations and complex instructional needs, the professional preparation and ongoing support of classroom teachers must remain a priority.

The challenge for educators is not simply to identify students with exceptional potential, but to ensure that their abilities are recognized, nurtured, and appropriately challenged throughout their educational experiences. The strength of a gifted education program is reflected not only in the specialized opportunities it provides, but also in the knowledge, instructional practices, and collective commitment of the educators who serve gifted learners every day.

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