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ABSTRACT

Novice teachers face formidable tasks of planning and management as they enter the classroom for the first time as professionals. They also bring with them mental imprints of what teaching and learning are like, images gained not from their professional preparation programs, but from their years as students. This qualitative study is part of a larger investigation, and was conducted to examine how student teachers (N=10) address the needs of diverse learners, among whom are the gifted, in their classrooms. Several modes of data gathering were utilized including: a modified version of the Classroom Practices Record, observational field notes, and semi-structured interviews with student teachers. The most common themes reflected across cases which affected interactions with and instruction of gifted learners were: (1) compromised beliefs in the existence and importance of student differences and needs; (2) ambiguity in the identification of individual differences and needs; (3) incomplete views of differentiating instruction in response to student needs; (4) shallow wells of strategies for enacting differentiation; and (5) the presence of factors which complicate and discourage understanding of student differences and needs. Some implications for further research are explored. (Contains 47 references.) (Author/LL)

Preservice Teachers' Perceptions of and Responses to the Differential Needs of Gifted Students in their Classrooms

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Abstract

Novice teachers face formidable tasks of planning and management as they enter the classroom for the first time as professionals. They also bring with them mental imprints of what teaching and learning are like, images gained not from their professional preparation programs, but from their years as students. Once in the role of teacher, those views may be reinforced by the circumstances of their apprenticeship. This qualitative study reports five themes in the preservice teaching experience of 10 novice teachers which may reinforce traditional views of schooling and discourage understanding and addressing unique learning needs of diverse learners such as the gifted.

Practices of Preservice Teachers Related to Gifted and other Diverse Learners

Introduction

Identifying student differences and providing instruction to accommodate those differences are problems frequently mentioned by beginning teachers, yet the complexity of teaching for the novice is so consuming that novices are often frustrated in their attempts to understand and address the needs of diverse students. As there are more and more calls for heterogeneity in classrooms, it is essential that we understand how novice teachers come to understand and address the needs of diverse learners, among whom are gifted learners, in their classrooms.

Research on attitudes and practices of novice teachers directly related to student diversity is not abundant. Nonetheless, there is evidence of ways in which novice teachers develop as professionals, ways in which they regard students with diverse learning needs--including the gifted--and ways in which their development may affect their interactions with and instruction of gifted learners.

Review of the Literature

Impact of Teacher Training on Novice Teachers

There is much evidence that preservice teachers enter and leave teacher preparation programs with a very similar set of beliefs (Book, Byers, & Freeman, 1983; Copeland, 1980; Finlayson & Cohen, 1967; Kagan, 1992; Lasley, 1980; Ross,1988; Tabachnick & Zeichner, 1984). There are varied hypotheses for the lack of modification of beliefs as a result of professional training. One suggestion is that the preservice teachers have spent so many hours as students during their own schooling developing models and images of school that the resulting beliefs are simply too

strong to be drastically reshaped (Bullough, 1989; Jordell, 1987; Lortie, 1975; Zeichner & Gore, 1990). This may be further confounded by the fact that most young people who enter teaching as a profession were comfortable and successful with the prevailing models of schooling (Pajares, 1992) which they encountered during their "apprenticeship of observation" (Lortie, 1975). A second hypothesis is that teacher education programs do, in fact, change attitudes of preservice teachers, but that everyday experience in schools washes out whatever changes came about (Veenman, 1984). Koehler (1985) suggests, however, that the key problem is that teacher education programs promote teaching skills and attitudes which the novices do not yet see as relevant or necessary. Others believe that teacher preparation programs transmit beliefs and practices which are largely conservative and in harmony with those held by entering novices, and which validate existing school practices (Giroux, 1980; Zeichner & Tabachnick, 1981). Whether one hypothesis or a combination is correct, it appears that novice teachers' attitudes about schooling are not radically shaped by experiences in their teacher development programs. Among beliefs which novices may continue to hold about teaching in spite of, or with reinforcement of teacher preparation are delineated by McDiarmid (1990):

1. Teaching subject matter involves telling or showing.
2. Every child is special and deserves an education tailored to his/her particular needs.
3. Different objectives and standards should be applied to different students.
4. Some children are not capable of learning basic skills in reading and mathematics.
5. Pupils are responsible for their school failures because they lack either the right home environment, right attitude, or right ability.

6. The more learners practice, the more they will learn.

7. Subject matter at the elementary school level is "simple" and they already know enough to start teaching before they begin their professional studies. (p.13)

Attitudes of Novices about Gifted and other Diverse Learners

One set of attitudes which novice teachers may bring with them to classroom teaching relates to learners such as gifted, remedial, learning disabled, emotionally disturbed and other students who are "academic outliers" in that their learning differs in some significant ways from the learning of their more "typical" agemates. These attitudes will shape ways in which novices interpret their experiences in the classroom (Wood & Flode, 1990).

Veteran educators without training in teaching exceptional students appear to be less tolerant of such students than are educators who have special training in exceptionalities (Bryan, 1974; Copenhaver & McIntyre, 1992; Hanninen, 1988; Leyser & Abrams, 1982; Sachs, 1990; Starko & Schack, 1989), although Panda and Bartel (1972) found that training after a certain level of awareness does not appear helpful in changing veteran teachers' perceptions about exceptional students. Preservice teacher attitudes may also correlate positively with their knowledge of gifted students (Morris, 1987; Nicely, Small, & Furman, 1980) or their sense of self-efficacy in meeting the needs of these students (Jordan, Kircaali-Iftar, & Diamond, 1993).

In general, it appears that experienced teachers prefer working with students of average or above average ability in comparison to remedial students (Khan & Weiss, 1972; Leyser & Abrams, 1982; Panda & Bartel, 1972). Nonetheless, many educators tend to view gifted learners in less favorable and more stereotypical ways (Crammond & Martin, 1987; House, 1979; Jacobs, 1975) or to devalue educational programs or

provisions for them (Colangelo & Kelly, 1983). Some studies indicate that preservice teachers' attitudes about the gifted are more positive than those of veteran teachers (Buttery, 1979), some suggest that experience as a teacher may predict positive attitudes toward the gifted (Hanninen, 1988; Rubenzer & Twaite, 1979), while others indicate little significant difference in the attitudes of novice and experienced teachers about gifted students (Crammond & Martin, 1987; Guskin, Majd-Jabbbari, & Peng, 1988).

Of more interest may be indications that novice teachers believe students do differ in learning profile and need, and desire to address those needs in meaningful ways (McDiarmid, 1990; Veenman, 1984), but that inexperience frustrates their attempts to do so (Fuller & Brown, 1975; Paine, 1990).

Complexities of Classroom Life for the Novice Teacher

While novice teachers may enter and leave teacher preparation programs with a similar set of beliefs about schooling, the novices are not able to practice education as would an experienced or expert teacher. It is important to be aware of the process of acclimation to classroom teaching which impacts the ability of the novice to translate beliefs into practice, and which may ultimately shape or reinforce beliefs about teaching and learning.

Novice teachers typically focus on "survival" concerns about personal adequacy, class control, being liked by students, opinions and evaluations of supervisors. Being praised and failing dominate their thoughts in the early stages of teaching. As a result of the early pressure of teaching, and perhaps in response to the "prevailing ethos of the public school" (Fuller & Brown, 1975, p.41) novice teachers become more negative, rigid, and authoritarian--shifting from a more idealistic or humanistic vantage point to a more controlling and custodial one.

Concerns about teaching conditions (e.g. numbers of students, non-instructional duties, inflexible situations, teaching materials), and concerns about pupils (e.g. recognizing the social and emotional needs of students, inappropriateness of curricular materials for certain students, tailoring content for individual students) tend to come later and with much more experience than is available to the novice (Fuller & Brown, 1975).

Novices are more likely to alter lessons in response to student requests or interests than in response to performance cues (Clark and Peterson, 1986), less likely to note and accommodate to student characteristics than to environmental/physical characteristics (e.g. time of day, importance of the lesson) as they teach (Calderhead, 1991), and more likely to focus on information related to classroom management than on information related to instruction (Clark & Peterson, 1986). Because they perceive fewer cues and interpret them in more limited ways, they are less able to make inferences than veteran teachers (Berliner, 1987). Further, novices have fewer teaching repertoires and modes of assessing student understanding than do experts, and are more bound to lesson plans (less able to improvise) than are experts, encountering problems when student questions require explanations not planned in advance (Livingston & Borko, 1989). Shulman (1987) points out that teachers must be able to define and assess key aspects of student ability, culture, motivation and prior knowledge and skill in order to be able to adjust or tailor a lesson to student needs. Thus the skill level of the novice, which makes instructional leadership in the classroom difficult in general, is likely to impact in significant ways the novice's ability to deal effectively with students who differ from the norm.

Need for Differentiated Instruction

Despite the complexity of the task for novice teachers, differentiated instruction

is important in classrooms populated by students whose learning profiles differ. "Good lessons invite students to enter the learning process at their own level and progress from there" (Reynolds, 1992, p. 9). Students with differing abilities and needs within a given class may find inequity in learning opportunities unless the teaching is flexible and appropriately matched to varying student need (Hargreaves and Fullan, 1992). Learning expectations which are too high or low may result in student disengagement from school-based learning (Reynolds, 1992).

This study examines factors in the student teaching experience of ten novices which relate to their instruction of diverse learners, among whom are gifted learners.

Background

The National Research Center on the Gifted and Talented at the University of Virginia is currently engaged in a three-phase study (baseline, intervention, and first-year teaching follow-up) designed to facilitate understanding of ways in which novice teachers develop awareness of needs of exceptional learners, including gifted learners, and how the novices begin meeting the needs of exceptional learners. Five colleges and university teacher education programs, selected on the basis of willingness to collaborate, access to classrooms in which student teachers instruct a range of diverse learners, and qualifications of staff to serve as site-directors for the study are participating in the project. The five university sites represent 3 states in the South, Southeast, and Middle Atlantic regions of the country, as well as small, medium and large colleges/universities. During the three-phase study, approximately 70 novices and their cooperating teachers will be surveyed, observed, and interviewed. The study looks at attitudes and practices of preservice teachers and their cooperating teachers related to diverse learners (1) with no research intervention (2) with a workshop intervention in which novices are helped to develop both awareness of and

strategies for meeting needs of diverse learners (3) with both the workshop intervention and a mentorship intervention focusing on needs of diverse learners, and (4) as the novice teachers move from student teaching and into their first year of full-time teaching. Data gathering for the larger study utilizes two quantitative instruments (a survey of attitudes and practices and a structured classroom observation format) and two qualitative instruments (a semi-structured classroom observation protocol and a semi-structured interview protocol). The larger study seeks to answer five questions: (1) Will intensive orientation to the nature and needs of diverse learners, including the gifted, and strategies for meeting those needs via instruction and/or mentoring result in changes of attitudes and practices of preservice teachers during student teaching or first-year teaching, (2) Will the interventions affect attitudes or practices of cooperating teachers, (3) How will preservice teachers seek out students in their classes for whom differentiation may be appropriate, (4) How do novice teachers assess the effectiveness of various instructional strategies for differentiating curriculum and instruction, and (5) How do novice teachers develop in their awareness of themselves as problem-solvers capable of assessing and meeting instructional needs of diverse learners, including the gifted?

Reported here are qualitative findings from four sites in phase one, or the baseline phase, of the larger study. The four sites are located in two states and represent small, medium and large colleges/universities. Data were the first available from the larger study and provided an opportunity to refine data collection procedures, develop data analysis procedures, and define and test emergent themes for the larger study.

Procedures

Selection of Participants

Novice teachers at each participating university site were chosen by a random selection procedure, stratified to ensure presence of diverse learners in the novice's classroom (therefore, for example, preservice teachers with full-time special education placements were removed from lists of potential candidates because of the likelihood that gifted learners and "typical" learners would be unrepresented or underrepresented in their classrooms), and to ensure participation by elementary, middle and secondary novices proportional to the numbers in the institution's teacher education program. Potential participants were then contacted by researchers with an explanation of the study, a description of what participating in it would require, and the option to agree to or decline participation. In the few instances where selected novices declined participation (typically because of concern about observers in the classroom), replacements were chosen by the same stratified random procedures and subsequent researcher contact. Researchers secured permission to conduct the study from school district superintendents and principals. Cooperating teachers also had the option of accepting or rejecting participation in the study. In two instances, cooperating teachers declined participation, again because of concern about additional observers in the classroom. In these instances, replacement novices were selected by previously described procedures.

Observer/Interviewers who gathered data in the study were selected for training and experience as teachers of diverse learners, and training in qualitative research or classroom observation. In addition, researchers provided a minimum of 1/2 day of training for all observer/interviewers on basic principles of qualitative observation and interviewing. A training manual with extensive information about the project, its procedures, and use of qualitative methods was also provided for all observer/interviewers.

Method

Qualitative research is well suited to inquiry when researchers need to retain the characteristics of real-life events (Yin, 1989), deal with problems of educational practice and extending the knowledge base about various facets of educational practice (Merriam, 1988), when the boundaries between the phenomenon investigated and the context in which it is investigated are not clear, when multiple sources of evidence are used (Yin, 1989), and when the desired end-product is a description. Each of these traits is descriptive of the current study.

Observer/interviewers utilized several modes of data gathering: (1) a modified version of the Classroom Practices Record (CPR) (Westberg, Dobyns & Archambault, 1990) to document the degree to which gifted learners and remedial/special education learners received differentiated content, process, or products during an observation (2) observational field notes taken throughout the classroom visit to comment on any aspect of instruction and teacher-student interaction which might be relevant to the novice's understanding of or attempt to meet instructional needs of diverse learners, and (3) a semi-structured interview protocol based on the study's questions and content of the CPR, but which also encouraged interviewers to pursue topics based on facets of the observation not recorded on the CPR.

Novice teachers were observed at least three times by the same observer/interviewer for approximately 1 1/2 hours per observation. One observation occurred early in the student teaching experience, one in the middle, and one near the end. The interviewer followed each observation with a tape recorded interview of the novice. Interviews were approximately 30 minutes long.

Following an observation-interview session, data gatherers expanded their field notes to reflect thoughts about the observation and interview separately, as well as

relationships between them, and between earlier observations and interviews with the same novice. When available, relevant documents were also obtained (e.g., novice teacher logs, lesson plans, sample assignments).

Interviews were transcribed, and case folders established for each novice containing interview transcripts, CPR forms, field notes, demographic data on the class(es) observed, and pre- and post administrations of a quantitative data gathering instrument (Survey of Practices with Students of Varying Needs) not used in the current findings.

Data Analysis

Using qualitative data analysis computer programs, researchers coded interview transcripts with preordinate codes reflecting the study's questions, and with codes which emerged throughout the data analysis period. Redundancy of codes led to development of themes which recur in the cases. Codes and themes were tested, expanded and modified though use of CPR forms, interviewer/observer field notes, and teacher documents. Ultimately, researchers wrote case summaries for each novice teacher, retaining coded transcripts for additional data analysis across cases.

The research team of 7 met at least weekly to discuss coding, and met in peer debriefing pairs weekly or biweekly to review one another's codes, themes and case reports. An audit trail (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) of raw data, coded data, themes, and case reports is available as an aid in establishing confirmability of data analysis procedures.

Findings presented here reflect themes recurrent across several cases and sites. While no finding is applicable to every novice studied, themes presented are the most common among the cases.

Results

The five most common patterns or themes across the cases of the novices studied which affect their interactions with and instruction of gifted learners are: (1) compromised beliefs in the existence and importance of student differences and needs (2) ambiguity in identifying student differences and needs (3) incomplete view of differentiating instruction in response to student differences and needs (4) shallow wells of strategies for enacting differentiation, and (5) the presence of factors which complicate and discourage understanding and addressing student differences and needs. In presenting the themes, every effort has been made to retain the voices of the novices as they talk about their induction into teaching diverse learners. To this end, each presentation of a theme begins with a quotation from one novice teacher which typifies the comments and practices of others as well.

Compromised Belief in Student Differences

> *"You should do everything that you can to see that all students can be successful, and a lot of times, that involves a lot of different things for a lot of different students."*

Like reciting familiar tenets of democracy, the novice teachers proclaim the existence and rightness of student differences. "They (the students) are going to be different, and that's okay, and I'm going to have to know what to do about it." But as is often the case, when the abstraction becomes real, the belief is compromised. "One of my fears now in planning is that I'm afraid I'm going to try to target the center and I won't think about the variation in the class and adapt for each student. It's so hard when you have 23 students in one class period." "...within the classroom, there's only so much I can do, you know, trying to keep up with everyone." "I'm ambivalent, because I have trouble making my lessons appropriate for every kid. It's hard having a sign that the bright kids might finish in five minutes, the other kids might need the whole class. Do I

make it simpler so that every kid can understand it, or do I make it harder as to challenge the brighter one, or do I do it somewhere in between?" "There are five or six kids in here who fly through the work. Then what do I do? Then I have these four who can't read. Then what do I do?"

The pull of students exceeds the resources of the young teachers to meet the needs. Because there is not enough skill, time, insight or even energy to plan or improvise to meet the needs of everyone, various outlier students can become a serious problem. The novices sense they must let someone down, and consciously or by default, they choose. Occasionally, the novice says she focuses her energy on higher achieving students. "My expectations in my classroom are usually medium to high, in fact, mostly high, but low enough, I think, for medium ability kids to do pretty well. Kids who are low tend to do not as well in my class, and the only thing that I can do for them is give them time to catch up, you know. More time to do the assignments and constantly remind them." More often among these novices, however, there was a clear empathy and preference for attending to low achieving learners. "Students who are at the lower level, I pay a lot more attention to them...I try to make sure there are things they're going to get, or they can at least enjoy while they are trying to do it." "(I find myself) caring more for the kids who need my help...I think when I'm between a rock and a hard place, I tend toward giving instruction to the lower kids and maybe let the brighter kids do something on their own." "I think a lot of times teachers don't give (gifted kids) attention because they know they're going to get it done, do a good job, that sort of thing." "I give most attention to the lower group because they need the most help in achieving and because they demand the most time." "If you direct your lessons to the special education students, you know you'll have the other ones covered." "I know gifted learners get the short end as far as being challenged, but they aren't hurt

as a result of it."

Throughout their preservice placements, the novices held on to the belief that students differ in their needs, but from the earliest interviews, there is a clear sense among virtually all of the young teachers that addressing those needs is a near impossibility. Observations indicate that the novices hold single-mindedly to the idea that one lesson must be crafted to suit the largest number of students possible. Tailoring may then be accomplished in some limited way for a few students, most often academic outliers who struggle with the lesson. For many diverse learners, especially the gifted, novices' professed belief in addressing student differences is rapidly compromised.

Ambiguity in Identifying Student Differences

"In defining and serving exceptionalities, I'm flying by the seat of my pants. I hate to admit that, but it's true."

While the preservice teachers freely talk about students who are gifted, highly able or "way ahead of the others," and those who are remedial, special education students, or "struggling," their inexperience in reading and responding to student traits is apparent in the rubrics they use to identify outliers. Struggling or remedial students are those who: "can't do the work," "turn in work late," "can't sit still," "are not responsible," "have bland ideas," "look at me with a blank stare... you can tell by their eyes," "don't know how to get it together," "you have to keep an eye on them," and "are apathetic." On the other hand, gifted or advanced students: "do the work," "sit still," "listen," "remember more," "get the work in," "do more quantity in the same time," "have high quality sentence structure," "answer questions," "grasp the material," "are not impulsive," "back up their thinking with a reason," "are right on when I need them to answer my questions," "are organized," and "understand the directions and purpose

for activities right away."

As the preservice teachers interpret traits of diverse learners, several interesting things commonly occur. First, the teachers often equate compliant behavior with academic readiness. This becomes especially puzzling for the novice teachers when a given child appears bright, and still "misbehaves." Representative are the cases of Jack who was both "hyperactive" and "very intelligent," and Sam who "answers questions really well" but "just can't write." These students demonstrate traits of double-labeled learners (e.g. gifted-learning disabled) and are a puzzlement to their young teachers who encounter what to them is the oxymoron of non-compliant intelligence, or compliant disability. The teacher is baffled by the contradictions. "I find this child intriguing. He's got a lot of potential. I tend to think he's gifted, you know...I lean on him a lot for intellectual discussions in class...but like I said, he's behind in his writing...his skills are not good...every now and then he has some trouble...He picks up on theoretical things....It's like he has the thought processes, but he can't get it on paper...When he gets to the writing, he kind of gives up...The writing kills him, and this class is all writing...He has to have (writing) to succeed, so I can't give him alternatives."

Second, for gifted learners, the preservice teachers nearly always equate completing school tasks happily, or at least successfully, with high ability. Thus a very creative, independent gifted learner is likely to be overlooked as highly able because work is lacking, sloppy or fails to follow directions. "He doesn't get his work in, you know, so he's not considered a top student. He's not successful."

Third, remedial or struggling learners are assumed to be incapable of understanding because they do not "cover the material" successfully and do not complete assignments according to specifications. "It's like if you don't have someone

standing over them saying, 'You need to do this,' they will sit there and talk and goof off the whole time." While some of the novices see a connection between behavior and academic frustration ("I have this student who gets up and walks around and does everything but the assignment, mainly, I think, because he finds it difficult"), more often the novice equates frustration during a given task with inability to learn ("He's not capable of staying on task. He can't recognize basic concepts") or intransigence ("The remedial students who don't know will hopefully sit there and pay attention so they can start learning." "The best thing I can do for a special ed. student is keep an eye on them.")

The novices' view of the gifted learner as compliant and successful may mirror both commonly held stereotypes of the gifted from the schooling experiences of the novices, as well as their early lack of the teaching experience which might later lead them to move beyond the limited and limiting view of giftedness.

Narrow Views of Differentiating Instruction

> *"Students are always required to do the same kind of work essentially. How they choose to do it is pretty much up to them. They're all required to do the same, basically, the same amount."*

Imprecise in their reading of student ability and need, many of the preservice are also imprecise as they discuss what it means to "differentiate" in their classrooms. Shulman (1987) suggests that there may be two elements in differentiating instruction to adapt to variations in ability and background among students. Using the analogy of a manufacturer of clothing, he first speaks of creating clothing (curricula/instruction) of an appropriate "fit" for a given child or group of children. This implies having more than one suit of clothing ready in anticipation of the varied "sizes" of children in the class. Then, he suggests, a teacher would still "tailor" a given suit to fit a particular

learner perfectly. Differentiation of curriculum might, then, be the equivalent of creating a clothes rack with varied sized suits (e.g., proactively planning different approaches to content, process and/or product), and individualization of instruction might be the equivalent of tailoring a suit which is a close fit for a child in order to make it as nearly perfect a fit as possible (e.g., different pacing, expression through preferred learning mode) .

For the great majority of the novices, the notion of proactively differentiating curriculum was absent in both their conversation and practice. There were a few exceptions. One teacher used some advanced assignments for a gifted learner. In one classroom, a novice continued her cooperating teacher's practice of using first grade "reading bins" with books of different levels of difficulty in different bins, matching bins to student readiness. In a kindergarten setting, a novice working with the senses taught all of her students about four categories of taste, and expanded the lesson for highly able learners by giving them a model of the tongue and having them identify where the four tastes would be detected. In most instances, however, differentiation of curriculum was, at best, synonymous with individualization of instruction. There was a pervasive one-size-fits-all approach to planning lessons, with individualization happening reactively on those occasions when a method of doing so presents itself. ("How do I differentiate? By trial and error.")

For academic outliers, the result is "clothing" which is so much "too big" or "too little" that tailoring it to fit is an impossibility. "In math, everyone does pretty much the same." "If someone finishes early, I give them an enrichment sheet. With remedial students, they may not understand, but at least they are being exposed to it." "The quiz is the same for everyone, but I look at them differently for children that have different ability levels." "It's not so much that the assignment was different, but the expectations

were different. What was considered to be excellent performance for some students would not have been considered to be (excellent) for others." "They all write the same thing, but it can be typed or written in pen. It all depends on which is more comfortable for them." "I never really individualize. I never set them apart and require something different of them." "I suppose I could ask the gifted child to do something more with the same information." "If gifted students finish early, I'll probably just think, probably unfortunately give them busy work like reading another chapter." "I think she spends a lot of her time bored in the sense that she wants to be moving along and could be moving along...she would benefit from moving along...But it's kind of like, what do you do, give them more work because they've done such a great job?"

The novices' conception that a single lesson must be crafted for all learners is especially problematic for academic outliers. For gifted learners, it is seldom the case that the "standard" lesson is challenging, because it is seldom the gifted learner who represents "standard" in the novice's thinking and planning. Further, these teachers seemed less aware of or empathetic to the profiles and needs of gifted learners than to profiles and needs of either "typical" or "struggling" learners.

At this juncture in their teaching, the novices do not generally possess sophisticated skills necessary to differentiate instruction. Because advanced teaching skills can develop over time, perhaps more troubling than the absence of sophisticated skills is the pervasive lack of perceived need to move toward classrooms in which differentiate instruction of students with differing needs.

Shallow Well of Strategies for Responding to Diversity of Need

"Since I can't be everywhere at once, I have brighter kids who can tutor or teach the lower ones."

Given the goal of ensuring that everyone learn ("cover") the same thing and

complete the same tasks, the overwhelmingly preferred instructional strategy for "differentiation" becomes use of c· ɔperative learning groups. One novice even noted, "Differentiation means putting kids of different abilities in a single cooperative group." In the context of cooperative learning as practiced by the novices, there are consistent role expectations for the academic outliers. High ability children are teachers, remedial children are learners. "I think when they are in a group (the gifted student) will take on the position of kind of like a teacher. She is the extra help they need in a group, you know." There is only an occasional sense that the "tutors" may lack original and challenging learning opportunities, or that the "learners" may be dependent on very inexperienced guides. "We grouped them, you know. This one is a very high ability, this is a very low one, let's put them together and kind of mix in the middle." "The use of groups is good, because some of the lower kids couldn't have done it by themselves." "If they see they are accountable for helping each other, then it's good because you have a bunch of little tutors or teachers as opposed to just one." "It's good for the kids who are tutoring and they don't even realize they are learning because when they explain something, by explaining, you learn something better." "The gifted student was starting to get bored, because he knows his letters forwards, backwards probably, but it's good to have him here because he can help the others." "It's better having a child who knows strategies to figure out a problem and a child who is less able to think because they could learn from one another." "Right now we try getting a group together so there is a lower ability child and a high ability child in the group so they can help each other. But sometimes I think the higher ability child overshadows and (the low ability children) are still not getting all the help they need."

The words of these novice teachers indicate that cooperative learning may create rather than diminish lines of demarcation between academic "haves" and "have

nots" in the minds of the novices. If this view prevails, it portends unhappy consequences for both advanced and struggling students.

While struggling learners are put in the questionable position of being taught by peers of like age who have no preparation for teaching, advanced learners are in the double bind of being expected to teach that which they already know to students for whom learning may be so difficult as to call for advanced teaching skills.

Factors Which Discourage Addressing Student Diversity

> *"I'm thinking about so many things right now that I feel like I'm not targeting on any one problem. I'm just trying to deal with it for now. And I don't know that I'll ever reach a time when I can target on any one problem."*

Becoming a teacher is a complex task, requiring simultaneous development and application of multiple skills. The novices we studied were energetic, hard working, and evidenced a desire to grow as effective educators. It is the complexity of teaching rather than a lack of effort which stymies them. At least four factors recurred in their interviews and observations as complicating their ability to understand and address needs of diverse learners: (1) issues of management, (2) views of teaching and learning, (3) weak role of assessment, and (4) lack of emphasis from superordinates on differentiation.

Not surprisingly, managing student behavior was a priority for these novices. Having students learn from different materials, at different rates, or in different ways appeared too risky to the preservice teachers. "The class works pretty much as a whole. I lecture a lot to avoid confusion." "(The remedial students) definitely need some one-on-one instruction, but we haven't been able to do that because there's too many kids." "I guess the whole time we just move steadily through in trying to keep everybody together and everyone moving together so that it's obvious that the class is

ready to move on to the next step." "You can't put one kid ahead of everyone else. It'd throw you off for the whole year." Meeting diverse needs of students interjects more variables into management, and the novices often rejected the risk ("I tried giving two different articles to various groups in one class to read and discuss. It's a big mistake because when you try to discuss it as a class, then the groups that didn't have the particular article aren't paying attention because they don't get it, you know, and I don't blame them").

A second complicating factor in addressing diversity of student need is the clear presence of traditional images of teacher as dispenser of knowledge ("When a gifted kid asks me a question beyond and I can satisfy them, then I think I'm doing something good"), student as consumer of knowledge ("They have to learn to take what I say and put it on paper"), and content as a discrete body of prescribed information to be covered in a specific period of time ("It's hard to be spontaneous when you have to cram so much in one class"). This view makes it difficult for preservice teachers to picture and construct a classroom in which diversity can be accommodated.

Further confounding the task of assessing and addressing needs of academic outliers is a virtual chasm of understanding and application of assessment strategies. In the absence of a clear picture of what a student knows or understands, it is easy to assume the single lesson of the day is appropriate for everyone. "How can I assess them? I don't see them that much?" "I don't know what appropriate responses <u>are</u>." "Essentially, evaluation comes down to 'did you do it' as opposed to 'how well did you do it.' That way, more students succeed." "To me, assessment is checking to see if the work is in." "What do you mean by 'readiness'? Like, do they have their work?"

A fourth discourager of addressing student diversity is the perceived near absence of advice and encouragement or advice from cooperating teachers, university

supervisors, and even teacher preparation programs toward that end. "I don't feel like I've been taught in college how to deal with different levels. You are taught there is the gifted program, and there's the LD and BD program, and you're taught little things about each group. You're told you have to keep the lower level students on task, and it's got to be a task they can perform. You've got to teach the upper level students and keep them from getting bored, and you have to keep the average students going along at a good pace. They don't really tell you how to do that." "There've never been any comments about that from my university supervisor that I can think of. I don't know if there have been any comments like that at all. It seems most advice is along the lines of advice about behavior." "The only advice I've gotten about addressing student differences is that it wasn't a good idea when I assigned a learning disabled student to be the reporter in a group." "No one has said anything to me about differentiating for student differences." "I asked my cooperating teacher if we could do something a little more advanced, a little extra with third period, because they're ahead, you know. But she said we had to keep them all together because they have to take the same test at the end of the year." "We had a course about exceptional children and it was a good class, except that it packed a lot into two hours a week, so it was hard to sift through." "I don't know what kinds of things we should do, and no one has given me any advice."

Gifted learners are easy to manage. They master the knowledge dispensed by the teacher. Thus appearing "successful" with school, and in the absence both of assessment which would indicated pre-instruction mastery of information and superordinate emphasis on differentiation, gifted learners become defined by the novices as those students least in need.

Discussion

The role of a novice teacher is a confounding one at best. Attempts to

understand and meet needs of diverse learners complicate issues of planning and management, and requires subtle understandings and applications of both content and pedagogy. One one level, it is easy to suggest that novice teachers may not yet be ready for the task of creating classrooms appropriate for the needs of academic outliers such as gifted, special education,or remedial learners. Rather, one might argue that novice teaching experiences are the equivalent of a medical internship or residency when the young practitioners can learn to specialize from their previous general knowledge.

There are at least two dangers in that assumption, however. First, these novices appear to enter teaching with images of classrooms that perpetuate teacher-centered, coverage-driven practices. Thus the "generalist" skills which the preservice teachers hone in the classroom maintain a status quo of schooling which is dubious in its value even for the "typical" learner for whom schools are designed. The liability for academic outliers is that despite proclamations of the existence of individual difference and the responsibility of the teacher to meet them, basic practices may close off avenues of "specialization" necessary for addressing the needs of gifted, remedial, and special education students. The second danger lies in the apparent reality that there is little support for the novices in changing either their images of schooling or their single-size practice of it. These novices sense that differentiating instruction for diverse learners is a low priority for their teacher education institutions, cooperating teachers, and university supervisors. If that is the case, rather than being a time of internship or residency during which special diagnostic and prescriptive skills will be developed for addressing needs of diverse learners, novices will gain tacit permission to dispense learning as though all students need the same prescription or treatment.

Because qualitative research does not claim generalizability, it is important to

conduct similar research with other novice teachers to determine the presence or absence of similar themes in their experience. There is also a need to follow preservice teachers into their first year of teaching to see whether patterns noted in this study persist or modify during the first year of full-time teaching. Finally, it is important to examine the impact of interventions designed specifically to impact practices of novice teachers with gifted and other diverse learners in order to develop strategies for facilitating teacher efficacy with with their diverse learning needs.

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