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Parent-teacher Shared Commitment as a Predictor for Teachers' Attitudes toward Gifted Students and Gifted Education

Ts`ooane P. Molapo (Corresponding author)

Educational Foundations and Research, University of North Dakota

231 Centennial Drive Stop 7189, Grand Forks, ND 58202

E-mail: Tsooane.molapo@my.und.edu

Meghan Salyers, PhD

T&L/Special Education, University of North Dakota

231 Centennial Drive Stop 7189, Grand Forks, ND 58202

E-mail: Meghan.salyers@email.und.edu

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Abstract

Parents and teachers play a critical and vital role in the education of gifted and talented students. This study looks into the attitudes of teachers regarding gifted students and gifted education to determine if parent-teacher shared commitment could predict teachers' attitudes toward gifted students. Moreover, the research examines if teacher attitudes differ by location. One hundred and seven K-12 teachers participated in the study. Parent-teacher shared commitment and having a gifted education program at one's school emerged as good predictors of teachers' support for gifted students and gifted education. Additionally, ability to influence decision-making self-efficacy closely related to parent-teacher shared commitment Moreover, teachers' attitudes did not differ by location. Many teachers supported gifted education programs; however, teachers held a strong negative view towards gifted students' acceleration.

Keywords: Attitudes, gifted education, gifted students, parent-teacher shared commitment, teachers

1. Introduction

For decades many Americans have held the belief that equity must be preferred over excellence in a democratic society, and anything short of that would lead to elitism (Clark, 1997). This tension between equity and excellence has been extensively debated in regard to the education of gifted children (Colangelo & Davis, 2003; Champion, 2007; Ford, 2003; Gallagher, 2003, 2004; Gentry, 2006; Renzulli, 2005). Some argue for equality in education, meaning same curriculum, standards and teaching methods for all students (Borland, 2005). Yet others argue that "offering a talented artist and a brilliant mathematician the same experience in art and math is not equity; equity is offering them an equal opportunity to pursue their individual goals towards excellence" (Clark, 1997, p.86). Often, teachers are puzzled by whether or not providing more help for children with difficulties comes at the expense of the gifted students. Furthermore, legislations such as No Child Left Behind have placed teachers in an exceedingly difficult predicament. How can teachers reach a balance between equity and excellence when they have been mandated to accommodate more for their struggling students? In light of these conflicts, teachers' attitudes toward gifted students and gifted education are not explicitly understood.

Classroom teachers play a critical role in influencing the learning, development, and achievement of gifted students (Clark, 2002**)**. Teachers could also significantly contribute in the education of gifted students by either enhancing or impeding the development of gifted children's potential (Geake & Gross, 2008; Collins, 2001), depending on the decisions they make. Consequently, the success of many gifted education programs will depend on teachers' attitudes toward gifted students and gifted education. The purpose of this study is to determine if ability to influence decision-making self-efficacy and parent-teacher shared commitment could predict teachers' attitudes toward gifted students and gifted education. Decision-making self-efficacy is defined as the self-confidence one has in their ability to make decisions. With regard to this study, decision-making self-efficacy is with the teachers' self-confidence in their ability to make decisions for gifted/talented students. The study will also attempt to discover if teachers' attitudes toward gifted students and gifted education differ due to location.

2. Literature Review

There are several definitions of gifted students. For this study, the Gagne (1985) Differentiated Model of Giftedness and Talent (DMGT), and the Javits Gifted and Talented Students Education Act definitions will be utilized. In Gagne's DMGT, giftedness and talent are defined as follows:

> *Giftedness* designates the possession and use of outstanding natural abilities (called aptitudes or gifts), in at least one ability domain, to a degree that places an individual at least among the top 10 percent of age peers.
>
> *Talent* designates the outstanding mastery of systematically developed abilities (or skills) and knowledge in at least one field of human activity to a degree that places an individual at least among the top 10 percent of age peers who are or have been active in

> that field or fields. (Cited in Sternberg and Davidson, 2005, p.99)

In their quest to promote gifted education, the federal Javits Gifted and Talented Students Education Act gave the following broader definition of gifted and talented children:

> Children and youth with outstanding talent perform or show the potential for performing at remarkably high levels of accomplishment when compared with others of their age, experience, or environment. These children and youth exhibit high performance capability in intellectual, creative, and/or artistic areas, possess an unusual leadership capacity, or excel in specific academic fields. They require services or activities not ordinarily provided by the schools. (U.S. Department of Education, 1993, p. 26)

2.1 Attitudes

Bohner and Dickel (2011) describe "attitude as an evaluation of an object of thought. Attitude objects comprise anything a person may hold in mind, ranging from the mundane to the abstract, including things, people, groups, and ideas" (p. 392). In essence, attitudes are evaluative judgments formed by the person (Ajzen, 2001; Crano and Prislin, 2006). Attitudes could be constructed in the situation based on currently accessible information (Schwarz (2007) or a collection of evaluations stored in memory (Visser & Mirabile, 2004). Additionally, Eagly and Chaiken (2007) define attitudes as "a psychological tendency that is expressed by evaluating a particular entity with some degree of favor or disfavor" (p.598).

Even though the relationship between attitudes and behavior is not often very consistent, in general, attitudes regularly influence behavior, perceptions and judgments (Bohner & Dickel, 2011; Bohner & Wänke, 2002; Glasman & Albarracín, 2006). Further theoretical framework suggests that attitudes are learned (Olson et al, 2001) and can be favorable or unfavorable towards an object or thing (Ajzen, 2005). Likewise, attitudes can be strong or weak; while strong attitudes are often stable over time and resistant to change, weaker attitudes are sometimes only temporary (Bassili, 1996, 2008; Lavine et al, 1998). Finally, some individuals may possess dual attitudes in the sense that new attitudes may not replace old attitudes, they simply override the existing ones (Wilson et al, 2000). In essence, "people can simultaneously hold two different attitudes toward a given object in the same context, one attitude implicit or habitual, the other explicit" (Ajzen, 2001, p.29). For instance, teachers may exhibit favorable support for gifted students and at the same time harbor negative feelings toward the special programs currently in existence for gifted students.

Therefore, the theoretical framework for the current study draws on the attitude ambivalence paradigm, that teachers' attitudes toward gifted students and gifted education are not well established and understood (Cramond & Martin, 1987; McCoach & Siegle, 2007). For instance, Gagné (1983) suggested that teachers have positive attitudes toward gifted students, while others (Cramond & Martin, 1987, Collins, 2001) attested that teachers tend to have more negative attitudes toward gifted students and gifted programs. Furthermore, in a survey of 250 teachers, Morris (1987) found that 60% of the teachers questioned had positive attitudes toward the gifted, while 40% of the teachers held negative attitudes.

Likewise, some cross-cultural teacher attitudes studies have found differences in teacher attitudes toward gifted students (Tirri & Tallent-Runnels, 1999; Tirri et al, 2002). For instance, in a study involving 147 Finnish teachers and 160 American teachers, Tirri and Tallent-Runnels (1999) found that Finnish teachers were more likely to support same education for all students than their American counterparts. Additionally, American teachers supported gifted students' acceleration more than Finnish teachers. In another study, Tirri et al. (2002) found differences in attitudes toward gifted students among American, Finnish and Chinese teachers.

In a more recent study, McCoach and Siegle (2007) confirmed these mixed results that some teachers "harbor very positive attitudes, other teachers harbor extraordinarily negative attitudes" (p.253). In particular, special education teachers were found to have less support for gifted education and lower attitudes toward acceleration. Moreover, McCoach and Siegle's study (2007) revealed that a teacher's self-perception as gifted had no relations to their attitudes toward gifted students and gifted education. Likewise, Lassig (2009) found that many teachers were supportive of the need for gifted education but at the same time were less supportive of some special gifted education provisions such as ability grouping and acceleration.

Furthermore, several researchers have found that gifted education training has no impact on teachers' attitudes toward gifted students and gifted education (McCoach and Siegle, 2007; Plunkett, 2000; Smith and Chan, 1996). For instance, as mentioned above McCoach and Siegle (2007) discovered that gifted education training was only related to teachers' self-perception as gifted but not to their attitudes toward gifted education. One would have guessed that having greater understanding of the unique characteristics and needs of gifted students would lead to teachers displaying more positive attitudes toward gifted students and gifted education. Moreover, teacher experience has been found to have little or no relations to teacher attitudes towards gifted education (Cramond & Martin, 1987; Lee et al, 2004; McCoach & Siegle, 2007; Schack & Starko 1990). To further confirm that teachers' attitudes toward gifted students are not well established, some studies have suggested that pre-service and experienced teachers with specialized training in gifted education tend to have more positive attitudes toward gifted students and are likely to deploy gifted education strategies such as acceleration (Heckenberg, 2001; Megay-Nespoli, 2001; Rash & Miller, 2000).

2.2 Parent-teacher shared commitment

Researchers have defined parent involvement in diverse ways; nonetheless the common theme in all the definitions is the emphasis on parents' participation in school events and direct communication between parents and school employees (Englund et al., 2004; McWayne et al., 2004). For instance, Hill et al., (2004) define parent involvement as "parents' interactions with schools and with their children to promote academic success" (p.1491). The central aim of these parent-teacher partnerships is to "help all families establish home environments to support children as students" (Ferrara & Ferrara, 2005 p. 79). Partnership models hold a strong view that when parents and teachers collaborate, children

have better schooling experiences (Epstein, 2001; Ferrara & Ferrara, 2005; Garcia, 2004;). A large body of research on parents involvement in schools follows Epstein's (2001) six-level framework of parent involvement that includes: parenting, learning at home, communicating with the school, volunteering at school, decision making in the school, and collaborating with the community.

Copious studies on parent involvement in education have documented benefits to students as well as parents involved, the school and the community at large (Chavkin, 1989; Epstein, 2001; Fan & Chen, 2001; Henderson & Mapp, 2002; Jeynes, 2003, 2007, 2012; Lee and Bowen, 2006). In particular, various researchers have identified parent involvement as an important factor for the academic success of children (Barnard, 2004; Epstein et, al, 1997; Fan & Chen, 2001; Gutman & Midgley 2000; Hill & Tyson, 2009; Jeynes, 2003, 2007, 2012; Senechal& LeFevre, 2002; Sheldon & Epstein, 2005;). For instance, Gutman and Midgley (2000) noticed higher students' grade point averages when parents are involved. Additionally, increased achievement in reading (Senechal& LeFevre, 2002) and writing (Epstein et, al, 1997) were associated with parents' involvement. Likewise, Barnard (2004) noted that "the more years a teacher rated a child's parent as participating average or better was also significantly associated with lower rates of school dropout, higher rates of high school completion, and more years of school completed" (p.56). Lastly, García, (2004) discovered that teacher self-efficacy was significantly correlated to the aforementioned Epstein (2001) six-level framework of home-school and community partnerships. Furthermore, earlier research by Epstein and Dauber (1991) revealed that parents' involvement influences teacher efficacy. Hence, it stands to reason that parents' involvement could influence teachers' decision-making self-efficacy toward gifted students.

2.3 The current study

The ambivalent results of the previous research on teachers' attitudes toward gifted students are a concern for proponents of gifted education (Davis & Rimm, 2004). In essence, those who devise gifted education programs are often encouraged to uncover teachers' attitudes regarding such programs (Davis & Rimm, 2004, p.55). Therefore, it would be very helpful for those who administer gifted education programs if they explicitly understood teachers' attitudes regarding such programs and gifted students in general. Hence, this study tests if teachers' ability to influence decision-making self-efficacy and parent-teacher shared commitment are good predictors of attitudes toward gifted students and gifted education. Furthermore, the researcher has interacted with parents who describe their diverse experiences as they interact with teachers in different locales who vary in their attitudes concerning which services gifted children need to develop to their potential. Consequently, the researcher has also hypothesized that teachers' attitudes will differ across different locations.

3. Method

3.1 Participants

Participants for this study were classroom teachers from three elementary schools, one

middle school, and three high schools in the Midwest region. An online survey was administered through Qualtrics Survey software. Seven school principals replied to the request and agreed to distribute the survey link to all classroom teachers at their schools. Moreover, the survey was administered to students at a Midwestern university who work as classroom teachers in different parts of the state and the country (Note: some of the students travel from neighboring states or take online courses). The project was approved under IRB and teachers' participation was voluntary. The survey was distributed to approximately 296 teachers and 107 (36.1%) completed the survey.

Thirty percent of the participants were male and 70 percent were females. Seventy-eight percent stated that they were married while 12 percent were single. The entire sample of teachers was white/Caucasian. Thirty-six percent held Bachelor's degrees, and 59 percent held a Master's degree. The mean age was (M=32, SD=12.8) and mean experience was (M=17, SD=11.8). Seventy percent of the teachers in the sample were from one state while 30 percent reported as being from different states within the Midwest region.

3.2 Measures

A single survey was designed in Qualtrics. It included three distinct areas for measurement: (1) the ability to influence decision-making self-efficacy scale that was adopted from Bandura (1997); (2) the Parent-Teacher Shared Commitment scale, developed by the researchers; and (3) teachers' attitudes toward the gifted, inspired by Gagne's and Nadeau's *Opinions about the Gifted and Their Education* instrument.

As stated, the ability to influence decision-making self-efficacy scale was adopted from Bandura (1997). Six items were assessed on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = *Strongly disagree*, 5 = *Strongly agree*). This construct was comprised of four positively worded statements, such as, "I can often influence the decisions that are made in the school", and two negatively worded items with questions such as, "Sometimes I am unable to share my visions in the school."

The researchers identified parent-teacher shared commitment as a critical variable likely to influence teachers' attitudes toward gifted students and gifted programs since many parents of gifted children often seem to be highly involved in their children's education. The Parent-Teacher Shared Commitment scale, which was developed by the researcher, contained seven statements, five of which were positively stated (e.g., "Parents at my school listen to and respect my perspectives"), and two of which were negatively stated (e.g., Parents at my school do not collaborate in decision making about a child's educational program"). Items were measured on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = *Strongly disagree*, 5 = *Strongly agree*). Questions for this scale were adapted from Christianson's (2004) parent-teacher partnership model.

Teachers' attitudes toward the gifted and gifted education were measured using the instrument developed by Gagné and Nadeau (1991) entitled *Opinions about the Gifted and Their Education*. Items were measured on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = *Strongly disagree*, 5 = *Strongly agree*). The overall Attitudes scale contained 34 items. The original Gagne attitude

scale was comprised of six subscales. This study adopted three subscales previously utilized in earlier research (McCoach & Siegle, 2007) since the main goal was to assess teachers' support for gifted students and gifted education. The Support subscale (Cronbach's alpha .76) consisted of five components (three positively worded and two negatively worded) with questions such as, **"**Our schools should offer special education services for the gifted"). This scale was the main scale testing teachers' support for gifted students and gifted education. The Elitism subscale (Cronbach's alpha .80) had six items with questions like, "Special programs for gifted children have the drawback of creating elitism." This subscale measured negative attitudes toward gifted education. Finally, the Acceleration subscale (Cronbach's alpha .71) had five statements (e.g., "When skipping a grade, gifted students miss important ideas (they have holes in their knowledge)"). This scale also measured negative attitudes of teachers (adapted from: Gagné ,1991; McCoach & Siegle, 2007).

To test the quality of the scales, an exploratory factor analysis was conducted for eight Parent-Teacher Shared Commitment items. Varimax rotation was utilized to determine if the scale assessed distinct constructs. The scale distributions all approached normality (i.e., skewness and kurtosis less than or equal to 1). Finally, items 3 and 7 were removed due to weak loading. The final six items had sufficient internal reliability (α=.79). Lastly, all items on the Ability to Influence Decision-Making Self-Efficacy scale loaded on to one factor. And all the items had sufficient internal reliability (α=.73).

4. Results

4.1 Demographics

Sixty-two percent of the teachers reported that their schools had gifted education programs, and 23 percent had training in gifted education. Teachers with Special Education degrees comprised about 15 percent while those with a Gifted Education degree were 2.8 percent. Those who stated that they were gifted education teachers were 8.4 percent. Eleven percent of the teachers in the sample stated that they had attended a gifted education conference.

To examine if teachers' attitudes differ depending on which state they resided, responses were compared on the Attitude subscales (Support, Elitism and Acceleration) using *t*-tests. Unexpectedly, the tests were non-significant for all three attitude subscales. It was anticipated that teachers from a state that mandated gifted education and have considerably greater funding towards gifted education would have more positive attitudes toward gifted students and gifted education. A t-test to determine differences between male and female teachers was also non-significant.

Another t-test was performed to test if teacher attitudes were different for those who had gifted education programs at their schools compared to those without gifted education programs at their schools. For the Support subscale there was a significant difference between teachers at the schools with gifted education programs and those from schools without gifted education programs. Teachers with gifted education programs showed more support toward gifted students and gifted education (Gifted Ed program M=20.13, Non-Gifted Ed program M=18.75): $t(105)=2.47$, $p<.05$. The acceleration t-test was also significant indicating that

teachers with gifted education programs at their school had lower support for acceleration (Gifted Program M=13.75, Non-Gifted Program M=12.60): t(105)= 2.44, p<.05. Finally, teachers who had gifted education training showed slightly more support toward gifted students and gifted education than those without gifted education training (Gifted Training M=20.80, Non-Gifted Ed Training M=19.26): t(103)= 2.38, p<.05.

4.2 Correlations

There were some significant correlations between the constructs (**see Table 1**). Acceleration and Elitism attitude subscale had positive correlations. This was not startling since these two subscales measure negative attitudes toward gifted students and gifted education. The negative correlation, between Support and Elitism was also expected because teachers who support more gifted education likely would not view it as a form of elitism. As anticipated, the parent-teacher shared commitment variable had a strong inverse correlation with gifted education support, which indicated the likelihood that teachers support gifted students and gifted education when there is a strong parent involvement in the education of gifted students and vice versa. Moreover, there was a significant correlation between ability to influence decision-making and parent-teacher shared commitment as expected. Finally, the correlation between ability to influence decision-making self-efficacy construct and the three attitudes subscales was not significant.

Table 1. Correlations between constructs

Constructs	1	2	3	4	5
1. Acceleration	-				
2. Elitism	.27**	-			
3. Support	.03	-.29*	-		
4. Ability to influence decision-making self- efficacy	-.08	.15	.04	-	
5.Parent-teachershared commitment	-.09	.17	-.20*	.19*	-

* $p < .05$ (2-tailed), ** $p < .01$ (2-tailed)

4.3 Regressions

The final quantitative analysis examined how well the ability to influence decision-making self-efficacy and parent-teacher shared commitment scales predicted support for gifted education using regressions **(see Table 2**). The ability to influence decision-making self-efficacy scale was not a good predictor of teachers' attitudes toward gifted students and gifted education. In response to the research question, "Does parent-teacher shared commitment predict teacher's attitudes toward gifted students and gifted education?" parent-teacher shared commitment was found to be a good predictor for gifted education support. Having a gifted education program at one's school was also a good predictor of support for gifted students and gifted education. Teacher experience and having training in

gifted education were not good predictors of gifted education support in this sample.

Table 2. Hierarchical regression to predict support for gifted education

Variables	β	t-value	p-value
Intercept			<.001
Gifted Ed Program	.20	2.08	<.05
Gifted Ed Training	.14	1.38	.17
Experience	.04	0.43	.67
Ability to Influence Decision-making	.06	0.56	.58
P/T Shared Commitment	-.21	-2.08	<.05

R^2= .11, F(4,96) =3.10, P<.05

5. Discussion

The results of this study confirmed the mixed results evidenced in much of the previous research on teacher attitudes toward gifted students that some teachers have strong support for gifted education while others harbor negative attitudes (McCoach & Siegele, 2007; Lassig, 2009; Tirri & Tallent-Runnels, 1999; Tirri et al, 2002). The researchers had anticipated a difference when comparing teachers' attitudes across state lines. However, these results shed some light on how similar teachers' attitudes are across the country. The resistance to acceleration and a belief that gifted education is a form of elitism may indicate hurdles that impact progress in advancing gifted education.

One conflicting result was that teachers with gifted education programs at their schools supported gifted education, yet still had negative views toward acceleration. This begs the question of whether teachers fully understand that acceleration is one type of current research-based programming for gifted students (Colangelo, Assouline, & Gross, 2004; Rogers, 2004; Steenbergen-Hu, & Moon, 2011). Can they truly support what they do not know?

In addition, the fact that gifted education training was not a good predictor of support for gifted education is also somewhat perplexing. Although one would assume that if a teacher is trained in gifted education they would embrace stronger attitudes favoring gifted students and gifted education, this study did not find support of this assumption. Rather, the data indicated that those with gifted education training did not have higher attitudes towards gifted students and gifted education. This seemed to confirm the results of the McCoach and Siegle (2007) study previously mentioned in the Attitudes section of this article. In addition, these

results beg the question of whether the surveyed teachers with gifted training were given their training recently or in several years past. To extend this question: were these teachers with gifted training then given continuing education on more current research-based methods? This study will not respond to these questions; however, they form a basis for further studies that should ensue.

Additionally, parent-teacher shared commitment emerged as a good predictor of teacher support for gifted education. The data seemed to verify the previous studies mentioned in the literature review as well. Parental input and advocacy for their gifted children effects collaboration between them and the teacher. Thus, it seems logical to conclude that their input regarding their child's unique needs could greatly influence teachers' decision-making self-efficacy. Although this study may not claim this in its entirety, it certainly makes headway toward this assertion.

Further, having a gifted program at one's school was also a good predictor of gifted education support. Yet, interestingly, teacher experience was not a good predictor of attitudes. This confirmed previous research that number of years teaching had little or no association with positive attitudes toward gifted students (Cramond & Martin, 1987; Hanninen, 1988; Lee et al, 2004; Schack & Starko 1990). These results created a gap in the researchers' understanding: if simply having a gifted program yielded support for the program, then why did teachers' experiences with this program (and other experiences) not affect their attitudes toward it?

In sum, this study is congruent with other studies by showing no gender differences in teacher attitudes toward gifted students and gifted education (Plunkett, 2000; W. Smith & Chan, 1996), the mixed results regarding teachers' attitudes toward gifted students and gifted education (McCoach and Siegle, 2007), and in the influence of parent-teacher shared commitment (Barnard, 2004; Fan & Chen, 2001; Hill & Tyson, 2009; Jeynes, 2003, 2007, 2012; Sheldon & Epstein, 2005). In addition, this study yielded more questions addressed in the following section.

5.1 Limitations and future research

This study had some limitations due to the small sample size and some nonrandom data collection. However, the notion of parent-teacher shared commitment as a predictor for teacher support for gifted students and gifted education could be developed further and be tested on a larger scale. In the researcher's experience, often parents of gifted children strongly desire to work with their child's educator; therefore, it stands to reason that the parent-teacher shared commitment measure could predict reliably teachers' attitudes toward gifted students. It would also be very interesting to explore the issue of teacher attitudes towards gifted students and gifted education qualitatively, then quantitatively. Talking to teachers would reveal more explicitly their attitudes toward gifted students and gifted education. From teachers' responses, questionnaires could then be developed to explore teachers' attitudes quantitatively. Finally, future research needs to be conducted more rigorously to find out why, in some instances, training in gifted education does not result in increased support for gifted students and gifted programming as shown in this study and

previous findings (McCoach and Siegle, 2007; Plunkett, 2000; W. Smith and Chan, 1996).

5.2 *Implications for Practice*

The results of this study could be used by gifted education proponents to establish strong partnerships between parents of gifted students and educators. The inverse relation between parent-teacher shared commitment and support for gifted students and gifted education reveal that if relationships between parents and teachers are strengthened, teacher attitudes might be understood. In essence, strong positive partnerships between teachers and parents are likely to influence teacher attitudes toward gifted students and gifted

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