

Position statement on teachers of the gifted and talented in Malta

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Abstract

The educational discourse in recent years in Malta has been on improving student learning outcomes by supporting the teaching profession through the development of various educational initiatives. While more attention, time and resources have been geared towards struggling students, little attention has been paid to gifted and talented students, something which could hinder them from developing their full potential. Teaching gifted and talented students requires special training, yet most practicing teachers in Malta have not been trained to teach gifted and talented students. The aim of this position statement is twofold. First, it calls for an increase in the quality of teacher training in gifted and talented education for practicing teachers within the Maltese context; and, second, it makes propositions for teacher training programmes and qualifications for teachers in the field.

Keywords: teacher training; gifted and talented education; gifted; talented; children

Introduction

The *National Curriculum Framework* [NCF] (Ministry of Education & Employment [MEDE], 2012) maintains that education should cater for “the needs of gifted and talented learners for whom the process of learning needs to be sufficiently challenging to engage and motivate them to develop their talents” (p. 41). Recent developments in Malta’s inclusive education policy (MEDE, 2019) have heightened the need for effective teaching approaches for students with cognitive learning diversity, including gifted and talented

students. A key determinant in the appropriate educational programme that meets these goals is dependent upon highly-qualified teachers, who are able to facilitate the learning of gifted and talented students (Centre for Education Statistics and Evaluation, 2019; Galitis, 2009; Haight, 2006; National Association for Gifted Children & Council of State Directors for Programs of the Gifted [NAGC-CEC], 2014).

Until recently, in Malta, teachers were not trained to work effectively with gifted and talented students. Recognising the need for highly-qualified teachers of the gifted and talented, this position statement suggests innovative strategies and alternatives to get interested teachers prepared, and qualified, into classrooms supporting gifted and talented students.

Purpose

This position statement draws attention to the lack of service provisions for gifted and talented students in Malta. Specifically, its purpose is to advocate for the introduction of highly-qualified teachers of the gifted and talented in the Maltese education system as part of the provision service to offer appropriate education programmes to meet the academic and emotional needs of gifted and talented students.

Before decisions about the provision of services in this area of education can be made, an agreed upon definition of giftedness and talent needs to be established. Within the Maltese context, the term “giftedness” is neither defined in the NCF (MEDE, 2012), nor is it defined in the most recent inclusive education policy (MEDE, 2019). In such circumstances, a definition is necessary to make this position statement relevant to the Maltese context. Such definition provides the direction for decisions concerning who will benefit from programmes and provisions for the gifted and talented. Some of the widely accepted definitions of giftedness are those of Gagné (2018), Harrison (2003), NAGC (n.d.) and Renzulli (1978). However, a universally-accepted definition of the term “giftedness” is problematic (Dia, 2010) and does not exist (Sternberg, Jarvin, & Grigorenko, 2010).

Following a review of different definitions of giftedness in the literature (Gagné, 2018; Harrison, 2003; NAGC, n.d.; Renzulli, 1978), this position statement adopts Gagné’s (2018) definition as being the most useful and relevant to the Maltese context. Gagné (2018) defines “*giftedness*” as being “the possession and use of biologically anchored and informally developed

outstanding natural abilities or aptitudes (e.g., gifts), in at least one ability domain, to a degree that places an individual at least among the top 10% of age peers” (p. 165). He defines “*talent*” as being “the outstanding mastery of systematically developed competencies (knowledge and skills) in at least one field of human activity to a degree that places an individual at least among the top 10% of learning peers (those having accumulated a similar amount of learning time from either current or past training)” (p. 165).

Role of teachers of the gifted and talented

A strong commitment to the education of gifted and talented students should be personalised for individuals and groups of learners by teachers with specialist knowledge, training and skills in the field. To achieve this, this position statement contends that teachers of the gifted and talented will be those who have special and high-quality training in teaching gifted and talented students. Additionally, this position statement posits that to uphold Malta’s commitment to identify and provide for gifted and talented students (MEDE, 2012, 2019), the roles of teachers of the gifted and talented need to be defined, developed and supported by national education policies.

By far, the most useful recommendations for teachers of the gifted and talented have been provided by the NAGC-CEC (2014). Recently, a good summary of these recommendations has been provided in the work of Stephens (2018, p. 536–537), as follows:

- understand learner development and individual learning differences, including how language, culture, economic status, family background, and/or disability influence the learning of gifted students;
- create safe, inclusive and culturally responsive learning environments that engage gifted students in rigorous learning activities and social interactions;
- use curricular content knowledge to advance learning for gifted students (e.g., incorporate central concepts, structures of the discipline, tools of inquiry, creativity, depth and complexity, acceleration);
- use multiple methods of assessment and data sources to make instructional decisions about gifted learners including technically sound formal and informal assessments that minimise bias;
- select, adapt, and use a repertoire of evidence-based instructional strategies to enhance the critical and creative thinking and problem-solving skills and affective development of gifted students;

- use foundational knowledge of the field and professional ethical principles to inform practice, engage in lifelong learning, and advance the profession (e.g., model respect of diversity, participate in professional activities and learning communities, engage in advocacy and mentoring, and;
- collaborate with families, other educators, related-service providers, and community agencies, among others.

These capabilities must be situated within the broader ethical, social, cultural and political dimensions of the introduction of gifted and talented education in Malta. Once in the classroom, teachers of the gifted and talented are encouraged to participate in ongoing professional training in the above-mentioned competencies and in other areas related to gifted and talented education.

Providing training for teachers of the gifted and talented is not enough. For teachers' professional learning and development to be effectively implemented, a whole school support programme, strong school leadership and organisational structures play crucial roles in ensuring that teachers implement changed practices because of their professional learning (Centre for Education Statistics and Evaluation, 2019; Peters & Jolly, 2018). Most importantly, the service of highly-qualified teachers of the gifted and talented shall operate across the continuum of provisions in many different learning environments, including early childhood centres, schools and special schools.

Training for teachers of the gifted and talented

As a specialised area of teaching, gifted and talented education requires teachers who have undergone specialised training (Rowley, 2012; Henderson & Jarvis, 2016). Specifically, for the education of the gifted and talented to be effectively implemented, teachers require special training in practices such as identification (Hodge & Kemp, 2006; Siegle & Powell, 2004), assessment (Ysseldyke & Tardrew, 2007), differentiation (Dixon, Yssel, McConnel, & Hardin, 2014; Wiggins, 1998), grouping (Tieso, 2005), and acceleration (Geake & Gross, 2008).

The existing literature on the education of gifted and talented students is extensive and suggests that teacher training and professional development enable teachers to foster high-quality education, increase students'

achievement and provide students with the right challenging opportunities to reach their full potential (Ayers, Sawyer, & Dinham, 2004; Fraser-Seeto, 2013; Garrett, Rubie-Davies, Alansari, Peterson, & Flint, 2015; Hansen & Feldhusen, 1994; Laine & Tirri, 2016; Little, 2018; Stephens, 2018; Vialle & Rogers, 2012; VanTassel-Baska & Stambaugh, 2005; Whitlock & DuCette, 1989). To achieve this, educators need to be equipped with the skills and knowledge of the latest research on what works best for gifted students, together with examples of effective practice in the field (VanTassel-Baska, Bracken, Feng, & Brown, 2009). Despite this strong evidence to suggest the effectiveness of teacher training for gifted and talented students, study in gifted and talented education is not a mandated part of in-service teacher training courses in Malta. The most crucial point made so far is that in-service teacher training must ensure that teachers are adequately prepared to provide all students with academically-rich instructions and to offer gifted and talented students appropriate levels of challenges in their learning process.

As a result, this position statement calls for the need for teachers of the gifted and talented in Malta to have access to a continuum of advanced study opportunities, ranging from certificate level through to Master's and Doctoral degrees. Training may be provided by the University of Malta or by any other tertiary education providers accredited by the Ministry for Education, , or any tertiary education institution that meets the requirements set by the Malta Qualifications Recognition Information Centre (MQRIC) and the requirements set by the Ministry for Education. Coursework can include accredited study-units related to gifted and talented education, postgraduate degrees and continuous professional development for teachers. Furthermore, advanced coursework should be embedded in teaching through practical experiences which also include opportunities for teachers to engage in critical reflection, development of teacher identity and inter-professional collaboration, and possibly the development of a community of practice. Given the lack of research in gifted education in Malta, specialisation at doctoral level should extend to research in gifted and talented education, including professional inquiries into communities of practice, philosophical investigations of various areas of giftedness and empirical research which adopts qualitative, quantitative and/or mixed methods.

Funding

Clearly, the Maltese education system would benefit from an investment in high-quality teacher training in gifted and talented education. Since teacher training can be costly, this position statement calls upon the Ministry for Education to financially support a range of professional learning and development opportunities to support ongoing professional learning and development in gifted and talented education for teachers interested in the field, particularly where costs for teachers to specialise are high.

Conclusion

In sum, this position statement recognises the need for highly-qualified teachers of the gifted and talented as the way forward in helping gifted and talented students reach their full potential. Hence, it recommends the introduction of opportunities for teacher training to enable teachers to develop and apply their skills as part of the specialist teaching workforce in Malta. Accordingly, this position statement supports the ongoing professional learning and development of these teachers as valued members of the teaching profession for the advancement of the Maltese education system, particularly for the advancement of gifted and talented education.

Acknowledgements

This study was conducted in part-fulfilment of the requirements of the Radboud International Training on High Ability (RITHA) specialist programme. The training programme was sponsored by the Ministry for Education.

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