

Contact, Connection, and Conceptions of Foundations

Christy Folsom

In the movie “Contact,” the character played by Jodie Foster was glued to the receiver hoping to pick up radio waves from a distant galaxy. She had gone well beyond curious to obsessed as she sought an answer to an often-asked question. Are we alone in the universe?

Those of us in the Conceptual Foundations Division may well experience similar feelings. We have spent this year exploring ways in which the theoretical and conceptual foundations utilized in gifted education can connect to the preparation of all teachers. We may be asking, “Are we alone in the educational universe in regard to our concern about foundations? Who else out there sees the critical importance of foundational principles to teaching practice in the classroom?”

Our questions carry with them a sense of urgency beyond the astronomer’s query. The answers to educational questions will directly effect many. The document “What Matters Most: Teaching for America’s Future (National Commission, 1996)” states that “in the next decade, the United States will need to hire more than *two million* (italics added) teachers to handle huge enrollment increases, replace an aging teacher workforce ready to retire, and respond to the chronic attrition of new teachers that plagues American schools” (p. 8).

This extraordinary alignment of circumstances provides an opportunity to bring about profound changes in the educational lives of students--gifted students included. An understanding of deep foundational principles can contribute to the creation of “competent and caring teachers (National Commission, 1996, p. 6).” Teachers who are foundationally prepared will be empowered to effect change in their individual classrooms by improving the interaction between the learner and the teacher. It is only at this invisible personal point that a real, lasting transformation of teaching is possible.

We, in the Conceptual Foundations Division of NAGC, believe that the foundations of learning are important, yet underutilized in the preparation of teachers. We are not alone. Others, too, feel strongly about the relationship between foundational principles and teaching practices in the classroom.

In a recent edition of the Association of Teacher Educators Newsletter (ATE), I heard the faint possibility of contact as I read an article by Steven A. Tozer, a professor in the College of Education at the University of Illinois at Chicago. He writes of his concern for the future of social foundations those courses that commonly appear as “history or philosophy of education, or school and society (Tozer, 1999, p.3).” His article is reprinted in our newsletter.

Historically, the practices of gifted education have been grounded in the scientific underpinnings found in psychology and cognitive science. Although attention is given to the emotional aspect of giftedness, gifted education has concentrated heavily on providing an intellectual environment rich in opportunity for critical and creative thinking. This focus has resulted in a more explicit emphasis on the conceptual foundations of thinking than is found in other areas of education.

Tozer presents the social foundations viewpoint more often discussed in general education. He gives three reasons why teachers need to be well grounded in the social foundations of education. Teachers, and I

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will add teacher educators, need to *understand* their teaching practices and the expected outcomes resulting from those practices. Teachers need the ability to *explain* their teaching. Teachers need to support their choices with *theoretically sound* reasoning [italics added] (Tozer, 1999).

Understanding, explaining, and supporting one's teaching are sound reasons for foundations-based teacher education. These same reasons also state why all teachers need the opportunity to gain applicable knowledge of the conceptual foundations that have been more accessible in gifted education. An important fourth reason to build teacher preparation on solid foundational knowledge is "to bolster their [teachers'] ability to help students learn" (Tom, 1999, p. 249).

Educators of the gifted can also benefit from a greater knowledge of the social foundations. Many educators of the gifted teach in regular classrooms, consult with classroom teachers about gifted students, work in professional development, or teach in general teacher preparation programs. Others teach gifted students in self-contained situations or prepare teachers of the gifted. Most often teachers of the gifted teach in the context of the general educational world. A deeper understanding of the historical and philosophical underpinnings of education found under the canopy of social foundations can help us understand circumstances as we find them.

Having made contact, it seems imperative that we find ways to better connect the social and intellectual foundations found in the fields of general and gifted education to actual practice in the classroom. Teacher preparation programs all too frequently offer a "bits and pieces" education. Isolated courses in educational psychology and philosophy seem to have few connections to each other, much less to the daily grind of the classroom. Yet, if these disparate theoretical foundations were to come together in a practical way in classrooms, would the experience of the daily grind give way to grand learning experiences that occur daily?

As we stand at the edge of educational possibility and necessity, making grand classrooms a reality will take all of us working together sharing the knowledge we have. If we are to generate and regenerate exemplary teachers for these classrooms, conscious and connected knowledge of intellectual and social foundations must form the core of their preparation programs. For the foundations of education to "permeate professional preparation programs" (Tozer, 1999, p. 6), our collaborative efforts must extend not only to the colleagues within our fields and within our departments or places of teaching, but across the hall and into the next building—contact far beyond our educational confines.

References

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