

WHAT GIFT?

The Reality of the Student Who is Gifted and Talented in Public School Classrooms

by Tempus Fugit Glass

The era of No Child Left Behind legislation is an excellent time to examine the field of gifted education. Bines (1991) lamented that, after more than 70 years of research, there is not even consensus on an operational definition of giftedness or the most reliable method for identifying gifted students. Evidence does support the following statement: There are some youngsters who are born with the capability to learn faster than others those ideas or concepts that societies value in children and in adults (Baldwin, 1994). According to Dalzell (1998), giftedness may be defined simply as intellectual precocity. Incumbent upon educators remains the challenge to resolve these lingering obstacles in order to best serve the students who are identified as gifted and therefore entitled to gifted education services.

The Nature of Giftedness

One critical factor of gifted development is cognition. Lewis and Michalson (1985) described cognition in gifted individuals as “comprising curiosity, attention and superior memory.” Another trait noted in gifted individuals is precocious language development. By the age of 2 or 3, many have extensive vocabularies and use of complex sentence structure. Gifted children also differ from the norm in several other ways: They are highly motivated, extremely independent, and tend to be more introverted and introspective (Winner, 1996). Meador (1996) described gifted children as people with the ability to learn rapidly, having advanced ability in a specific domain such as math or reading, to be creative, and to be verbally proficient.

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The Evolution of Giftedness in the U.S.

In order to comprehend the state of affairs faced by gifted students in public schools, it is necessary to understand the history and politics that have brought current policy and practice to where it stands. Prior to the 20th century, accounts of giftedness contained an aura of mystery. Child prodigies were targets of intense scrutiny and were looked at as “freaks of nature” by many, including renowned French psychologist Alfred Binet (Hildreth, 1966). Many educators viewed highly intelligent students as deviants whose exceptional abilities were liabilities, rather than assets (Jost, 1997).

To date, the seminal study of giftedness is Lewis Terman’s *Genetic Studies of Genius* (1925), which tracked the lives of more than 1,000 highly intelligent children. The shift in American attitudes toward giftedness began with its publication. Although there are diversity issues associated with this study, namely cultural and economic, Terman’s findings are summarized in a 1922 American Psychological Association address, in which he stated that gifted children are “superior to unselected children in physique, health, and social adjustment; [and] marked by superior moral attitudes.”

According to Bines (1991), special programs designed to accommodate bright kids have been around since the turn of the century, but the idea of identifying the gifted as a distinct group first gained scientific credibility in the 1920s. The first nationwide push to improve education for gifted students came in the 1950s, the early years of the Cold War. In 1958, Congress approved the first-ever direct federal aid to education: The National Defense and Education Act (Jost, 1997). The goal of educating gifted students took a back seat in the 1960s to concerns about educational

equity. The civil rights and anti-poverty movements focused attention on the poor quality of education being provided to youngsters in urban ghettos and centers of rural poverty. The need to educate the brightest competed with a strong egalitarian imperative to provide the best quality education to all students (Tannenbaum, 1993). Improving the schooling of “at-risk” students became the driving force in American education (Renzulli & Reis, 1991). Yet, virtually no parallel emphasis on providing high-end excellence and access for advanced learners existed (Tomlinson, 1994).

In 1970, Congress included a provision in an omnibus aid to education bill calling for the Commissioner of Education to conduct a study on the needs of gifted students. The resulting 1971 report by Commissioner Sidney P. Marland, Jr. depicted gifted students as a neglected minority of at least 2.5 million pupils. The report provided the impetus for the federal government’s first direct assistance to gifted education, which came in the form of the Office of the Gifted and Talented, which was housed under the Bureau of Education for the Handicapped. In 1974, Congress appropriated to states the first program of financial aid specifically for gifted students. A follow-up study commissioned by the Office of Education in 1976

reported progress, but concluded that gifted education still suffered from inadequate funding, a shortage of trained personnel, and questionable methods for identifying gifted students (Jost, 1997).

In 1988, Congress approved the Jacob K. Javits Gifted and Talented Student Education Act. To date, the Javits Gifted and Talented Education Program in the U.S. Department of Education remains the federal government’s only program designed for the education of gifted students (Jost, 1997). In the past 16 years, there have been no further improvements and no mandate for gifted education at the federal level.

The Identification Dilemma

Historically, children tested with the Stanford-Binet IQ instrument who score 136 or higher have been designated as gifted (Bracy, 1994). The validity of the Stanford-Binet as the criterion to identify gifted individuals has come under serious criticism from those who believe that IQ testing excludes a whole host of other ways in which giftedness can be manifested. Critics of gifted education forcefully complain that students in special academic programs are predominantly White and middle class. The resulting disparities have fueled charges that gifted and talented education often represents little more than privileged education for privileged students at public expense. Such criticism calls into question current procedures and stimulates a search for alternative identification policies (Gallagher, 2000).

Many gifted programs have already deemphasized IQ and achievement tests in favor of more inclusive alternative identification procedures (Frasier, 1991). Texas and Georgia are among the states that have recently adopted guidelines calling on local school systems to use

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multiple criteria in identifying students for gifted programs. One of the National Association for Gifted Children's guiding principles for identification is that "Instruments used for student assessment to determine eligibility for gifted education services must measure diverse abilities, talents, strengths, and needs" (Landrum, Callahan, & Shaklee, 2001, p. 44).

The Design Dilemma

Debate continues pitting inclusive classroom settings against homogeneous grouping practices. Educational reform efforts stress heterogeneous grouping as a desired practice (Hoekman, McCormick, & Gross, 1999). This inclusive classroom structure consolidates exceptional youngsters in groups with regular students who have different educational needs (Thornton, 1995). It is as members of a regular classroom that gifted students typically receive the majority of their instruction (White, 2000). "The view that gifted students will be able to develop their full potential in an inclusive classroom environment is highly naïve," noted Jost (1997), adding, "gifted students have a tremendous thirst for complexity, which requires additional materials and an accelerated rate of learning. They require a differentiation in the curriculum and instruction so they can maximize their potential."

The lack of challenge in the curriculum for higher level students is exacerbated by public schools when they cope with budgetary shortfalls, increasing enrollment, demands on teacher time, and lack of teacher skill by placing gifted students in regular classrooms with curricula aimed at the abilities of the average pupil (Jost, 1997). Boring, monotonous busywork may also be stressful and demotivating for individu-

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als who prefer higher level thinking and reasoning activities. High-IQ students are able to handle about twice as many challenging tasks as an average-IQ student. A person with great skills, but few opportunities for applying them will ultimately become bored and possibly anxious (Hoekman, McCormick, & Gross, 1999).

According to Thornton (1995), "Our school systems are actually giving tacit approval to creating underachievement in one ability group so that the needs of the other ability group can be served. . . . This . . . is egalitarianism at its worst." In line with this theoretical framework, one of the essential goals for education becomes the provision of a level of challenge beyond the current level of skill (Bloom, 1985). Each individual's full potential is not explored if the majority of the class can complete every task with relative ease (Meador, 1996).

The intellectual potential of gifted students depends, in part, upon optimal educational intervention. It is the duty of the schools to notice precocious children and provide for their education, just as it is the duty of the schools to provide for all others (Piiro, 1999). Public schools move between these two models, but, despite what educational

research shows, heterogeneous grouping and cooperative learning approaches appear to have the advantage in policy debates. The Department of Education has estimated that only about 5% of U.S. students are enrolled in gifted classes of some sort. Special classes for the gifted remain the exception, not the rule. Therefore, most gifted kids spend all day in regular classrooms where it is the classroom teacher who bears the responsibility for the majority of instruction for gifted students on a day-to-day basis.

The Bottom Line: Funding

The final, and possibly least discussed, issue at odds with gifted education is funding. Funding for gifted education is meager. Frank Rainey (1996), former director of gifted and talented education in Colorado, commented, "Gifted education in most places is way underfunded at the state level. Considering that there are probably as many gifted kids as there are kids with disabilities, there's a huge difference." The federal government fares little better, spending only \$5 million in 1996 on the only educational program targeted specifically at gifted and talented students—less than .02 % of the Department of Education's \$31 billion budget (Jost, 1997).

Promising Practices and Approaches

No Child Left Behind needs to consider gifted education. Rather than homogeneous teaching of groups of heterogeneous students, educators are increasingly focusing on flexible groupings based on the academic and personal potential of each child. To promote and encourage students, gifted curricula

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stress high expectations and stimulation, which, when combined with care and support, foster an environment where talents can develop and flourish.

Where does that leave the state of education for gifted students in today's schools? What strategies and applications can we, as educators, use to benefit all students? What promising practices and approaches are being implemented to ensure that we are not wasting a most valuable resource?

One of the most often-presented strategies of educational improvement for gifted students is sophisticated personnel preparation. Teachers of the gifted and talented are given special training, after which they can better prepare individually appropriate curricula and recognize the characteristics of giftedness or high-ability students in their own classrooms.

In addition, the gifted teaching specialty requires the teacher to have further developed skills than his or her regular classroom counterparts. The specialist must possess content sophistication, be able to differentiate lessons and units, and teach complex ideas and conceptualizations. Once content standards are established in general education, the gifted specialist adds to these standards, creating a "standards-plus" criteria that enhances content for gifted students. The key element is to provide a measure of gifted education training to all teachers since every teacher is responsible for educating the gifted students in their own classes.

Another increasingly popular strategy for gifted education programming is maintaining minimum standards of student contact time with gifted education specialists. Including gifted students in the regular classroom is feasible and supported when a gifted specialist comes into the classroom and provides extension opportunities. No consensus exists among educators concerning the amount of time

the specialist should spend with the students and their regular teachers. Currently, most of the decisions that determine policy are driven by economics.

The ability grouping model is another useful approach. This model stresses interaction with peers of similar ability levels to decrease frustration and interpersonal isolation. Working with peers of like ability enables gifted children to gain insight into their own abilities. This method also allows teachers to organize classrooms more effectively and accommodate a variety of developmental ranges. Techniques currently in use include grouping for specific subjects, grouping for specific talents, or grouping to provide high-ability students enriched or accelerated curricula. Students who satisfactorily demonstrate mastery of educational objectives are allowed to progress deeper into the subject area by moving above and beyond general competencies toward higher grade-level standards or enrichment opportunities rooted in the course curriculum. Students are also encouraged to take ownership of the process by focusing on areas that hold great personal or group interest.

A centers approach to enrichment activities is also highly effective as a method for expanding upon general curricular requirements. A well-organized center in the regular classroom can provide alternative activities, second-tier activities, or self-guided activities that add depth to the regular curriculum. The center can also provide students an avenue to showcase talents, work at an individualized pace, and personalize educational experiences.

The Current Reality of the Gifted in Public School Classrooms

One important question to raise in educating gifted students is, "Are current

educational practices beneficial, or merely established?" Schools can contribute to problems if they fail to give gifted students an appropriately challenging curriculum. Research-supported practices are only useful if they are implemented. One of the most cherished principles of American education is equality of opportunity. No Child Left Behind cannot, at its core, be interpreted to mean that the brightest students must wait on the slowest. *All* students should have the right to exercise their talents to the fullest potential. Accepting the educational philosophy of excellence for all does not equate to identical education for all. There are no identical students. Why, then, should there exist identical programming? In the realm of education, cookie-cutter models offer no solution.

In this country, the overriding quest for equity has been purchased at the expense of excellence. Without advanced or enriched programs, gifted students may fall short of their potential, or worse, lose interest in school altogether. The goal of educating people to the best of their abilities remains unrealized if all people are not educated at their level. Encouragement alone will not suffice. Children gain self-confidence through intellectual challenge. The key lies in providing a range of activities that allows all students, including the gifted, to display their fullest abilities.

America's brightest young people have quit learning. Since curricula have been "dumbed down" to help weaker students, gifted students perceive no need to work in order to achieve or succeed. This policy often amounts to expecting the brightest students to tutor other youngsters while waiting for their own instruction at the expense of their own educational development.

Recent changes in curricular emphasis, from mastery of content to improving self-esteem, may be damaging to

cognitive development, critical thinking, and national test scores. The dramatic decline of Scholastic Assessment Test (SAT) scores from 1963 to 1980 reveals genuine deterioration in the education of our college-bound students. Today, median SAT scores are lower by about 150 points than they were in 1963 (London, 1996).

In addition, our culture maintains ambivalence toward intellectuals. Intellect is not something we revere. Outstanding mental ability is not viewed as a gift. Kids who care passionately about their education many times carry the stigma of being “odd” or “nerds.” The truly unthinkable response to this dilemma is to ignore the need for change.

Not to recognize and develop the abilities of gifted and talented students will stifle their opportunity and negate their potential both personally and as contributors to society. How is it possible for someone to give back what he or she never receives? If a gift is to be valued, it must be desirable. Are we creating an environment that creates desire for achievement, success, and excellence, or are we inadvertently modeling a system that holds mediocrity as the ultimate achievement and homogeneity as the true ideal? The truth is, individual attention, emphasis on critical thinking, encouragement of potential, high expectations, and enrichment experiences are sound educational practices. Gifted programs have exposed one glaring and encompassing problem: We expect too little from too many. As we move further away from the pursuit of excellence, we come closer to providing little more than “big kid” daycare. ©GCT

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