
Introduction to Public Policy in Gifted Education

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It is an honor to participate in the impressive *Gifted Child Quarterly* seminal article series. An attempt to summarize various dimensions of our profession at the fiftieth anniversary of the National Association for Gifted Children is an impressive effort. The reader should be aware that although this project focuses on the contributions made to the field through *GCCQ*, there are many fine and relevant contributions made on this topic in two other journals focusing on gifted children, *Roepers Review* and *Journal for the Education of the Gifted*, as well as relevant articles in more general journals such as *American Psychologist*, and *Exceptional Children*, among others.

The selection of articles in this section on educational policy does represent many of the major issues to face educators of gifted students, and those concerned about them, over several decades. After all this time we can still marvel at the basic questions with which we are still struggling. Who are the gifted students? Indeed, are there such persons as gifted students? What should be done differently with them in the educational system? Should the teachers of these children receive special instruction?

But what are the questions that are *not* being asked in this collection of articles? Questions such as, "Do we have the necessary tools to do our job well?" "If the tools are not there, (e.g. curriculum differentiation, personnel preparation) can we create them, and can we convince public decision makers to help us create them?" These are policy issues of some consequence to our future as a profession. Is it any wonder that we have been unable to impact the major engines of change in our society: *legislation, court decisions, administrative rule*

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making, and *professional initiatives*? (Gallagher, 2002). The articles in this section speak eloquently to the uncertainty with which we present the image of our profession to public decision makers and to educational leaders.

Let us take, for example, the central issue of who “gifted students” are, or should we even say “gifted students” at all? Renzulli and Reis (1991) lay out one of the clear issues of our field. Are we dealing with gifted individuals *or* gifted behaviors? Well, special education is about people, not constructs such as giftedness or creativity. It is the business of public decision makers to care for people, not abstractions. Can we imagine a parent’s day at the National Association for Gifted Behaviors? No, for good or ill, we are dealing with human beings with certain characteristics and their fate in our educational system.

Are they a homogeneous group? Of course not, any more than children with mental retardation or learning disabilities or shortstops form a homogeneous group, but the gifted students’ advanced ability to think well beyond their age level does create a *common* problem for the educational system and policy makers.

INEQUITY AND GIFTEDNESS

This author would like to suggest that we are periodically embarrassed by the obvious inequality among students of differing classes, ethnic backgrounds, etc. It is as though the phrase, “All men (women) are created equal,” is supposed to refer to their personal characteristics and talents rather than their status before the law. Renzulli and Reis (1991) suggest, “Many people have been led to believe that certain individuals have been endowed with a golden chromosome that makes him or her a gifted person.”

As Gallagher (2000) points out, the field of behavioral genetics has made it overwhelmingly clear that there are such things as ‘golden chromosomes.’ If we would pay attention to something as monumental as the Human Genome Project we should conclude that there *are* some youngsters who are born with the capacity to learn faster than others those ideas or concepts that modern societies value in children and adults (Gallagher, p. 6). Are we ready to believe the statement by Coleman, Sanders, and Cross (1997) that it makes sense that some people are more able than others in certain areas at certain times in their lives, and that program options for the development of different paths for different people, from talent to talent, and from time to time, should be sought out? (p. 107) These authors point out that there is no universal gifted child, only children who are more able than others in some areas of life. However, there are still clusters of these students waiting for someone to challenge their special talents.

THE COST OF INDECISION

The consequences of the inability of the professional gifted community to present a strong case to influence the engines of change can be seen in what can

happen when these engines *are* energized. The education of children with disabilities, with its own many problems of definition, has made remarkable progress because of public decision makers who were convinced by professionals and parents of the need for special education. The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) is a powerful piece of *legislation*, which provides for a Free and Appropriate Public Education (FAPE) for all children. *Court decisions* have confirmed the rights of children to this Free and Appropriate Public Education. *Administrative rule making* also sharpens the requirements for inclusion of children with disabilities with general education. Together, with strong public initiative, these public actions have created a climate of acceptance for these children in the educational enterprise. But if we sound an uncertain trumpet, who will follow? Why are we so tentative in our actions?

The Unfairness of It All

After many years, this author has reached a conclusion that there is a thread of hidden values that lie behind the opposition to gifted education that has even made educators and parents of gifted students hesitant in espousing their cause. This was dramatically illustrated by an angry woman who approached the author after he had given a talk on gifted students and said, "God wouldn't do that." Puzzled, I asked her to explain. She continued, "God wouldn't make a world where some children (gifted students) had so much and other children had so little."

Just so. The appearance of the unfairness of it all has bothered many people and influenced more of the discussion of the issues related to gifted students than we would like to believe. For example, if we can attribute the cognitive differences that we can clearly observe between students to unfair environments rather than unfair genetics then the differences are manmade and more acceptable to us. Perhaps these "gifted behaviors" are solely due to a favorable environment? It is easier to blame unhappy social conditions than an inequitable universe.

The clear differences observed in the attitudes of middle school teachers and teachers of cooperative learning from the attitudes of teachers of gifted students reported by Gallagher, Coleman, and Nelson (1995) also showed the tendency in general education to *minimize* the differences between gifted students and the general run of students. In the view of these general education teachers, nothing special need be done for gifted students; the reforms of cooperative learning and the middle school movement should suffice. Teachers of gifted students clearly differed on that point, accepting a difference between general and gifted students that called for different educational approaches.

The article by Purcell (1993) clearly demonstrates what would happen when gifted programs are eliminated and gifted students are put back into the general education program. They would resume the same program as all the other students, and no special notice would be taken of them, at least in that setting. Even the article by Jackson (1988) reporting that "[p]recocious reading ability is

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associated with general intelligence but not all precocious readers have high IQ and not all children with high IQs learn to read early" (p. 204) seems to downplay the differences.

Obviously some children with high IQs will not be early readers for a variety of environmental reasons, but the fact that some (many?) of these students can read three or more grades beyond their life age would seem to catch our attention and require some differentiated education. By admitting that such students require some differentiated education, we confirm that there are meaningful differences between gifted students and average students—a difference that has made us nervous in the first place.

We concern ourselves with differences between racial and ethnic groups on ability measures, but the significant point is that there is an extraordinary range of measured ability *within* each group, with students scoring at the highest level of ability in whatever group you choose. Until we can accept the fact that inherent differences between students are a natural part of life and, indeed, can be seen as creating persons who through their superior intellect can creatively play a significant role in solving many of mankind's continuing problems (war, plague, poverty, injustice, etc.), we may continue to apologize for putting effort and resources into providing special education for gifted students and gifted programs.

The Contributions of Gifted Education

Should gifted education be a pilot experimental program designed to improve general education? Tomlinson and Callahan (1992) point out in their article the many real and potential contributions that gifted education has made to general education. These include the emphasis on advanced thinking processes (such as problem solving and problem finding), and metacognitive processes (such as planning and strategies for attacking ill-defined problems).

In addition, the emphasis in gifted education on multiple modes of instruction (inquiry learning, curriculum differentiation, compacting, etc.) and holding to standards of excellence in content fields, seeking hidden talent through unconventional methods (such as portfolio analysis, product review, etc.) beyond standard testing, have all been helpful to general education in its continual search for a more effective education. Such contributions could hardly be made without separation of those gifted students for special instruction. Treffinger (1991) also notes the important role played by gifted educators as catalysts to bring to the students and other staff skills and resources to reach their own instructional goals.

Certainly, encouraging cross communication between general education and special education through journals, conferences, conventions, etc. as suggested by Tomlinson and Callahan (1992) can be one method of enriching both areas and facilitating the transmission of ideas from one group to another.

How to blend gifted education with general education has been a question decades old. Two decades ago, Treffinger (1982) proposed a blended program as follows:

1. Gifted programming leads to a wide range of services that are considered valuable by the staff of the schools. . . .
2. These services cannot be provided effectively by various teachers in the regular program.
3. Gifted education staff provides resources and consultation to nurture and enhance the performance of all staff members. . . .
4. The efforts of the gifted program are integrated with . . . the other components of the school program.

Treffinger's proposals still seem appropriate but leave some questions unanswered. Who is going to train the gifted specialists? From whence comes differentiated curriculum? Where will the research come from to undergird the special program? How will these *support features* be paid for? The answers to these questions will not emerge naturally out of current programs, as we must plan and fight for them to occur.

DO WE NEED SPECIALISTS IN GIFTED EDUCATION?

A part of the establishment of a specialty in education is the employment of teachers who have received special preparation. One half of the fifty states have certification requirements for teachers of gifted students in specialized programs but, of course, this means that half of the states do not. Renzulli (1985) reports on a court case in Massachusetts using the issue of whether there is indeed a specialty in this area where a teacher of the gifted was hired over a teacher of more general experience. Gallagher (2000) raises the issue again as to whether there truly is a personnel preparation program for professionals while pointing out that the Board of Professional Teaching Standards still does not recognize a teacher of the gifted as a specialty. Coleman's perceptive case study (1994) of a teacher at work with gifted students typifies what we would hope all teachers can become. Coleman did a detailed observation and interview of a teacher whose sensitivity and commitment to high student performance made you wish he could be cloned.

It is time that the profession collectively answers the questions that it continually asks itself. Until it does so, it shall have few hopes that public decision makers will divert scarce resources in their direction. To the question, "Are there such persons as gifted students?" the answer is, "Yes, there are, and their abilities are partly genetic and partly the result of rich opportunities." The difference in prevalence of measured giftedness in ethnic groups is due to the wide variation of social and educational opportunities available to them, and the call for special efforts to find and nurture hidden talent in less environmentally favored groups is now being encouraged in the federal Javits program.

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Do we need teachers who are specially trained? Yes, we do. Their training should include helping students to understanding the special nature of gifted individuals, teaching them research techniques to seek knowledge, how to organize knowledge, and how to be an active learner. Should all students be taught these things? Yes, but the level of conceptual understanding of gifted students should require them to go into more depth since they will likely go on to graduate and professional training. Programs like the International Baccalaureate in middle and secondary schools, or strong Advanced Placement courses, can bring desired rigor to the content subjects they are taking.

Does our work have relevance to general education? Yes, it does. We can be a pilot study for new educational techniques but we should remember educational separation is part of the training of gifted musicians and athletes. We also need separation and special training.

Are we a support system for general education, or a separate entity unto ourselves? We are certainly part of a potential support system for general education, but we also should have a degree of separation that helps develop students who will be the top rank of their professions and fields of interest. Cooper (1998) aims higher, for a curriculum of conscience that helps students establish an ethical or moral base for their lives; but who will pay for the differentiated curriculum development to bring such goals to life?

The engines of educational change: *legislation, court decisions, administrative rule making and professional initiatives* have only lightly touched the education of gifted students (Gallagher, 2002). Most of the discussions in this section have focused upon differences between professional viewpoints about definition, identification, differentiation, etc.

There have been few major initiatives to place into public codes (legislation, court decisions, rule making, etc.) special programs for gifted education for personnel preparation, for development of differentiated curricula, for research and program evaluation, or technical assistance. Those support system elements help to bring quality education to students of all levels of ability. Yet, it is only by establishing these special support programs and related public support that quality education for gifted students can be attained and maintained.

In another profession, the physician treating a patient will often start with the weakest treatment available and then progress to stronger treatments once the first attempt has been seen to have little effect. We seem to have been following that approach in educating gifted students by prescribing a minimal treatment (one might even say a nontherapeutic dose) designed hopefully to do some good without upsetting other people, perhaps because of the inequity issues noted earlier.

As a profession, we need to come to some consensus that we need stronger treatments. Should we diminish our requests for needed assistance if we are accused of elitism or racism? Or should we respond that we are doing work important to our community and our country, and we need the tools to do the

job well? What we are doing for these students is worth doing, but we could be doing a great deal more with additional targeted resources supporting the general education teacher and the development of specialists in gifted education. The failure to fight in the public arena for such scarce resources will raise again the question posed two decades ago by Renzulli (1980), looking toward 1990. "Will the gifted child movement be alive and well in 2010?"

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