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Beyond Gifted Education: Building a Shared Agenda for School Reform

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This article explores the ways in which gifted education programs as they are currently defined, designed, and implemented lead schools away from rather than toward broader school reform. The author argues that gifted education programs function as a form of educational triage, providing an excellent education for those students for whom educational failure would not be tolerated while leaving the general educational system untouched and immune from analysis and critique. Educational, political, and economic justifications for gifted education are explored with particular reference to alternative ways to conceptualize the debate and the response so that the needs of all students are addressed. Consequences for teachers, students, and society of implementing gifted programs are discussed. Some of the key issues critical to the reexamination of the gifted construct are then explored, including: silence, the pain of gifted students, characteristics of appropriate differentiation, the fear of abandonment of gifted students, the excellence/equity debate, and the possibilities of wide-scale reform. The article concludes with an elaboration of research and policy agendas that could move the educational system forward and avoid positioning school reform advocates, gifted education proponents, and full inclusion supporters in opposition to one another.

These are difficult, contested times for gifted education. Recent attention to the continuing racial segregation of school opportunities and a growing commitment to multicultural education have focused considerable attention on tracking programs in school. As more schools move towards detracking (George, 1992; Oakes, 1985; Wheelock, 1992), gifted programs, in some ways the ultimate track, come under closer scrutiny. At the same time, many schools are moving to end the segregation of students with disabilities and toward creating fully inclusive schools in which students with behavioral and cognitive challenges are educated in regular classrooms alongside

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their chronological peers (Stainback & Stainback, 1990). The apparent conflict between moving schools towards more inclusion with a commitment to heterogeneous education and the maintenance of segregated gifted programs that serve only a small group of students, often in separate settings, has become salient (Sapon-Shevin, 1984).

At the same time that gifted education has been challenged educationally and politically, economic cutbacks in education have jeopardized the continuation of funding for gifted education, forcing gifted education advocates to defend the appropriateness and legitimacy of their programs.

In this article, I will present a critique of gifted education with particular focus on the ways in which maintaining gifted programs leads us away from broader school reform. I will then address some of the key issues critical to a reexamination of the gifted construct and will end with an identification of a shared agenda of research and policy change that I believe will move the entire educational system forward and avoid positioning school reform advocates, gifted education proponents, and full-inclusion supporters in opposition to one another.

**Gifted Education as Educational Triage**

In my recently published book, *Playing Favorites: Gifted Education and the Disruption of Community* (Sapon-Shevin, 1994), I argue that gifted education as it is currently defined and implemented in this country is elitist, meritocratic, and constitutes a form of educational triage. Gifted programs are implemented for students for whom educational failure would not be tolerated (generally the children of white, privileged parents) and are enacted in ways that leave the general educational system untouched and immune from analysis and critique. We can then focus on changing (improving) education for students identified as "gifted" rather than on a comprehensive, cohesive analysis, critique, and reform of the overall educational system.

I do not in any way impugn the motives or hard work of those who have devoted their professional lives to gifted education, nor do I doubt that many gifted educators are genuinely devoted to improving the educational opportunities of many children. But neither good motives nor great effort can alter the ways in which gifted education has lead to the creation of separate systems of education that create quality programs, often outside the realm of general education. For
example, the implementation of gifted programs often results in increased racial segregation within schools, an outcome that must be critically interrogated apart from the motives or understandings of the educational architects who designed them. And, unfortunately, the issues raised by gifted education go far beyond poor implementation or lack of quality programs; I believe that the ways in which gifted education is defined, constituted, and enacted leads directly to increased segregation, limited educational opportunities for the majority of students, and damage to children's social and political developments. To quote Calvin Coolidge: "There is no right way to do the wrong thing."

Responding to Justifications for Gifted Education

The justifications offered for providing discrete, specialized services to students identified as "gifted" can be described in three categories: educational need, social justice, and political and economic exigencies. I will describe each of these arguments briefly and include an alternative to conceptualize the debate and the response so that it addresses the needs of all students. Those who cite the educational needs of gifted students cite the ways in which gifted students are different from other students and, thus, require a different educational program. Although there are extensive discussions about the need to identify more gifted students, the need to expand the definition of giftedness to include multiple forms of intelligence, and the particular concern about the underidentification of gifted students from minority groups and students with disabilities, the reality of the category itself is rarely challenged. The belief is that there is such a thing as "giftedness," that some children "have it," that we can test for it, and, once we have identified it, that we can respond to it educationally.

I argue, instead, that giftedness is a social construct, a way of thinking and describing that exists in the eyes of the definer (Sapon-Shevin, 1987). It is not that children do not differ in many dimensions—clearly they do—but decisions about how to define the category, where to make "cut off" points, and how to discriminate between those in the category and those outside of it are ethical and political decisions that are highly influenced by values; beliefs about children, intelligence, and education; and the surrounding cultural and economic context.

Gifted education proponents argue that the regular classroom as currently organized and implemented is largely not amenable to change and that many teachers and students are hostile to gifted
students, thus necessitating the removal of gifted students to a safe haven where they can be with other students like themselves. As an educator who spends a considerable amount of time in a wide range of schools, I would not disagree, for the most part, with the characterization of many classrooms as boring, uninspiring places filled with irrelevant curricula, unimaginative teaching, and a singular lack of community. I would also not argue that those regular education classrooms—as they are currently organized—are ideal (or even acceptable) for meeting the needs of students identified as gifted, but neither are they the classrooms I would desire for any other students. Deciding to remove some children from that setting in order to meet their putative educational needs elsewhere has significant implications. First, it communicates a sense of hopelessness and despair about the ability of teachers to change—about the possibilities of ever structuring our classrooms as inclusive, stimulating, multilevel, diverse learning communities that meet the needs of a wide range of students within a unified setting. Second, removing those children whose needs are not being met in the typical classroom makes it painfully clear that some parents (because of wealth, information, connections, or power) have the possibility of removing their children (whose scores are used to justify that removal) while others do not. Most significantly, however, the removal of gifted children in order to provide them with an “appropriate” education leaves untouched the nature and quality of the regular education classroom, confirming the following assumptions (all of which I believe to be erroneous):

1. What is inappropriate for gifted students is appropriate for everyone else (the worksheets are not good for gifted students, but they are for the rest);
2. What is inappropriate for nongifted students is not the same as what is inappropriate for gifted students (there are two kinds of problems in our schools: some of these are problems for gifted students, others for typical students, but they require discrete solutions);
3. What is good for gifted students would not be good for everyone else (the Shakespeare-in-the-park program, the young philosophers’ club, the great books program, and the community mentorships offered to the gifted are not advisable or appropriate for other students);
4. What is good for education in general will not be good for the gifted (general school reform can never address the needs of gifted students; solutions for gifted students must be external to the general reform).

All of these assumptions impede our ability to look at and under-
stand the educational system broadly and interfere with seeking and implementing solutions that attempt to meet the needs of gifted students within a context of meeting the needs of all students.

There are also those who argue that it is only fair to provide specialized services for gifted students because they are an "underserved minority group" who can be described as "deprived," and as suffering "psychological damage and permanent impairment of their abilities to function well" [Marland, 1971]. By making a case for the ways in which gifted students are neglected, poorly served, often ridiculed, and isolated, gifted education advocates argue that gifted programs are not inequitable at all but simply a way of providing the differential education that different students need and that to deny a specialized education to gifted students is no more just than denying such an education to students identified as "disabled" or "handicapped."

Justifying the validity of the educational needs of gifted students by referencing the ways in which schools have been willing to or forced to meet the needs of students with disabilities is quite common among gifted educators [Sapon-Shevin, 1994]. Ironically, however, that argument fails to take into account that models of special education are changing dramatically in this country and that segregated special education classrooms and even pull-out programs are increasingly being replaced by more inclusive, push-in models of service provision [Stainback & Stainback, 1990; Villa, Thousand, Stainback, & Stainback, 1992]. Justifying the need or the justice of providing services for students with unique educational needs cannot be equated with any particular configuration or organization of service delivery; and declaring that "it's only fair" to provide services to gifted students doesn't tell us how those services should be provided, by whom, where, or with what relation to the services provided to other students.

Arguments framed in terms of justice are complex because they often fail to discriminate between the goals of equality of access, equality of services, and equality of outcome. Do we mean that all students should be treated the same, or do we mean that all students would be treated "equally differently" according to some set of needs or judgements about them? Few educators would advocate equal treatment if by that we meant giving every child the same kind of educational experiences at the same pace, using the same materials, and so on. Neither can it be argued that all students will emerge the same (equality of outcomes) regardless of how well (or badly) they are treated. The problem lies in determining how and to which differences we should attend. What is the difference between
appropriate differentiation based on a valid difference and elitism or prejudicial treatment based on an assumed difference, a value-laden description of that difference, or assumptions about who can and cannot profit from such different treatment? The key issue is whether gifted programs provide differentiation that is clearly linked to the child's difference (in the same way that we are justified in giving a larger portion of food to a 12-year old than to a 4-year old) or whether the differentiation is not only based on faulty, questionable assumptions about inherent differences among children but also results in further, continuing, and more deeply embedded and significant discrimination in the future. Perhaps an argument for “equal treatment” should be recast as a need for “equally good treatment” or “equally responsive treatment,” or arguing that gifted programs are “fair” is irrelevant and leads us away from a careful examination of the context in which such programs occur and the effects of gifted programs on children, teachers, parents, schools, and society.

Political and economic arguments for gifted programs are advanced at both local and national levels. There is often substantial parental pressure to create and maintain gifted programs. When an adjacent school district has a gifted program, other districts feel considerable pressure to implement some kind of differential programming or risk the departure of those families whose children might have enrolled in such a program. Within large urban districts, particularly those characterized by impoverished, struggling schools and large ethnically diverse populations, gifted programs [including gifted magnet programs] have served and have sometimes been promoted as a way of stemming white flight. Presumably by providing segregated gifted programming, some white parents whose children are in the gifted program will remain within the district and the tax assessment area. Parental demand or an increased interest in gifted programming can be traced directly to the increasing racial integration of many schools and communities. Gifted programs often result in the resegregation of schools: white students are in gifted programs and students of color are in the “mainstream.” The benefits provided by such programs—smaller classes, more enthusiastic teachers, a rich curriculum, more individualization—are all changes that would benefit all students. How could we look at the problems of poor, urban schools and inadequate funding for education without resorting to resegregation in the name of quality education? What kinds of programs [schools within schools, multilevel curricula, mentorship programs] could be implemented that would meet the needs of a wide range of learners?

At the national level, gifted programs are supported as neces-
sary for maintaining our pre-eminence in global economic markets. Some argue that we have overspent on students with educational challenges and problems and that it is about time we increased our spending on "the best and the brightest" as these students are our hope for the future. But aren't all children part of the future? Are we really willing to give up so completely on making our educational system work for all students?

Regardless of the motivations espoused for developing gifted programs, such programs have serious consequences for students, teachers, education in general, and our broader society. What are the results (both intended and unintended) of implementing gifted programming for a small subset of students, and how else could services be delivered?

Consequences for Teachers

I recently conducted a study of gifted education as it was organized in a small town in the Midwest, Prairieview (Sapon-Shevin, 1994). In order to understand the ways in which the teachers, parents, and staff understood the district's gifted program (a one-day-a-week pull-out program in grades 3–6 and a half-day pull-out enrichment program in grades K–2), I received permission to interview members of the school community. As part of this study, I spoke with 36 of the 40 elementary teachers in the district, district administrators, parents of students in the gifted program, students in the gifted program, and the teacher of the gifted. I asked them to talk about how they chose students for the gifted program (a one-day-a-week pull-out program), how comfortable they were with this process, and to talk about the effects of the gifted program on their own classroom teaching.

Three reactions were common: relief, disempowerment, and de-skilling. Many of the teachers were relieved that the needs of "gifted" students were being met outside their classroom. They felt inordinately burdened by the demands of classroom teaching and were pleased that some of the additional educational needs of gifted students were being met elsewhere. Many of the teachers, however, also felt disempowered by the process of student selection and gifted programming. Students were selected for the gifted program based on test scores and then confirmation by classroom teachers. Teachers could not initiate the referral process nor could they veto the decision of the committee to include or exclude a particular student. It was very awkward for some teachers to communicate the results of the selection process to parents and students and to defend that
decision if it was challenged when they themselves were largely external to the process itself. Some of the teachers were very relieved when students didn’t ask or stopped asking, “When will I get to go?” or “How come Jeremy gets to go and I don’t?” because they felt that they were being asked to defend a decision they didn’t make and because they were conscious of the tremendous significance of that decision to some children.

Pulling out a small group of students for differential education had other effects on classroom teaching. Many teachers made modifications in what they did when the gifted students were gone so that the absent students wouldn’t miss anything important and to keep children who went to the gifted program from being upset. In another school with a gifted pull-out program, teachers were explicitly instructed not to introduce new material or do anything “fun” while the gifted students were gone. Therefore, nongifted students not only didn’t have the additional educational opportunities provided to students in the gifted program (the math olympiad, the science fair, the community-service project), but their own educational experiences were circumscribed and distorted by teachers who had to plan around the systematic absence of a significant group of students. This kind of practice makes it difficult for teachers to think about and plan for their class as a cohesive community, and it also communicates a distressing message to all students: gifted students are the important learners around whom instruction is planned and organized, even in their absence.

Most teachers interviewed were aware of the difficulties of balancing individual and group needs in their classroom and were eager for support with students whose needs they saw as different or difficult to meet. But the nature of the support offered was limited to pull-out or removal rather than any kind of encouragement or concrete resources for meeting the gifted child’s needs within the context of the regular classroom. Thus, teachers were not supported in changing the nature or quality of their classroom instruction in order to meet the needs of a wider range of students within a shared context. This systematic deskilling (it takes a special person to work with those students) was resented by some of the teachers. One teacher said, “They don’t have to leave my room to get a good education.” Others thought that some of the activities and resources devoted to the gifted program had broader applicability and appeal. One of the main tenets of the full-inclusion movement (Stainback & Stainback, 1990; Villa et al., 1992) has been that all teachers must be prepared with the skills, attitudes, and enthusiasm necessary to
work with diverse learners within a common classroom setting. Preparing and supporting teachers by category ("special education teacher," "regular classroom teacher," and "gifted teacher") creates inevitable challenges to collaboration, integration of methods and approaches, and the ability to look at the multifaceted nature of the educational needs of every student [Pugach, 1988].

Consequences for Students

What are the effects on students [both those identified as gifted and those implicitly labeled as "nongifted"] of going to schools that have gifted programs? In a study by the Massachusetts Advocacy Center (1990) entitled Locked In/Locked Out: Tracking and Placement Practices in Boston Public Schools, students talked about the Advanced Work Classes that tended to serve mostly white, mostly middle-class students. The nonlabeled children consistently talked about the kids who were "smarter" and did "harder work" and linked these differential educational opportunities to different outcomes. One third grader explained, "[Advanced work class students] do better than other kids when they leave school. They'll be smarter because they've been taught more" [p. 21]. Students not chosen have to figure out why they aren't having the enriched educational opportunities that some of their classmates are having. Students were very conscious of the experiences they weren't having: they knew that the gifted kids were going on a field trip, were having a camping trip, or were participating in a science fair. These were almost always experiences that seemed interesting and appealing, and they had to reconcile their desire to participate with the reality that they weren't considered eligible. One student, not in the gifted program, commented to me, "If you don't go to Barnette [the name of the gifted program's school], everyone thinks you're not as smart as the kids who do." In fact, in this district, the gifted students are known and referred to by teachers and students as the "Barnette kids."

What about children who are identified as "gifted"? What messages do they get, and what is their experience of being labeled and separated. In Gifted Children Speak Out [Delisle, 1984], 6,000 students identified as gifted responded to questions about their experiences. For many of them, being identified as "gifted" and performing at a high level has been a source of isolation, rejection, and humiliation. Many of them also voiced the belief that such responses to their accelerated performance were somehow inevitable (as opposed to contextually grounded and "taught") and that their removal as gifted
students constituted the only rational response to their differing educational needs and their lack of acceptance. The gifted students I interviewed for my study were mostly satisfied with the program, but there were areas of conflict for them as well. Several of them provided evidence of their efforts to maintain cordial peer relationships with classmates in the regular classroom. They did not want to be perceived as “snotty” or “show-offs” but did enjoy the status of being “smart” and looked up to. They reconciled their own positive assessment of the program with other students’ desires to be in the program by talking about how “hard” the program was and how not everyone would want to do such “hard work.”

For both students in the gifted program and students excluded from it, there was the pain of separation and implied valuing (or devaluing) of their characteristics. The classroom community was disrupted by the removal of certain children, by the distortions in scheduling and curriculum flow, and by the fact that many of the teachers never explained why certain children were leaving and what they were doing in the gifted program and/or why other children would never have those opportunities. Some of the students in the gifted-students program hated missing what was going on in their regular classroom and felt bad when they came back to find that they had missed a birthday party or other community event. All children deserve to be valued and supported, and no student should have to choose between high achievement and fulfilling their potential and being an accepted, welcomed member of a cohesive classroom community.

Consequences for Schools

When schools organize instruction so that there are regular classes and gifted classes, regular teachers and gifted teachers, regular curricula and gifted curricula, then it becomes very difficult to implement whole-school reform and restructuring. Some of the impetus behind the move towards full inclusion has come from an understanding of the problems of having a “dual system”—special education and regular education—and the presence of a gifted education program really creates a “triple system.” How can we think about school and classroom organization, grouping patterns, teacher responsibilities, and curriculum reform when our efforts are circumscribed by the labels of the children we serve and the boundaries that separate different programs? Gifted programs were created, in many cases, because regular educational programs were not ade-
quately meeting the needs of high-achieving students. Removing
gifted children to a separate environment does not solve the prob-
lems of unresponsive classrooms, teachers hostile to high achievers,
an atmosphere intolerant of diversity, inflexible and rigid curricula,
and boring and ineffectual teaching strategies. Such removal, in
fact, keeps us from working for more pervasive change. The time,
energy, resources, and commitment of parents whose children are
in the gifted program become focused on making things better for
their own children within whatever particular confines those chil-
dren are being served. Abandoning gifted programs does not mean
abandoning educational quality and individual responsiveness, but
eliminating gifted programs would force us to look at what we want
for all students. We must not mistake differential education (tailoring
educational programs and instruction to meet the needs of unique
student characteristics) with differentially good education (a situ-
ation in which only some students get a high quality, personalized
education while the majority are left with uniform mediocrity and
an overall poor-quality education).

Consequences for Society

If we are genuinely committed to creating a just, equitable, demo-
cracic society, then we must look critically at the effects of gifted pro-
grames on all children. To exclude any child from quality education
is to fail all children. Our lives—economic, political and social—are
too closely woven to limit the effects of any singular education de-
cision to the small group directly effected. From a strictly economic
perspective, we all pay for the marginalization and limitations we
place on others. From an ethical standpoint, how can we justify gross
inequalities of privilege and opportunity?

Opening a Discussion on Gifted Education: Points of Entry

Reconceptualizing gifted education is difficult for political, practi-
cal, and conceptual reasons; debates about gifted education often
become heated and nonproductive. Perhaps by naming the ways and
the places in which the debate on gifted education gets limited or
curtailed, we can open up new areas for discussion and begin to
question the taken-for-granted assumptions and beliefs that interfere
with a more interactive, far-reaching debate.
Silence

The field of gifted education acknowledges the legitimacy of certain kinds of questions and critiques but not others. Although there is lots of discussion about how best to identify gifted students, different program models and structures, and even how to diversify the student population served in gifted programs, fundamental issues about the social construction of giftedness and the political and ethical ramifications of providing this particular form of differential education for a small group of students are left largely untouched. One of my major concerns about the way in which gifted education is constructed and enacted in our country is that it has not been subjected to the kinds of debate and discussion I think is critical in a country that professes to having democratic schooling as its goal. I wish to make it clear that it isn’t that gifted educators aren’t talking and discussing their field. The question is to whom are they talking and how is that discourse community circumscribed? In a recent review of my book, Schroeder-Davis (1994) says that there is considerable debate and discussion about gifted education, that there is no conspiracy of silence; I think it is important to understand that research and debate about gifted education that takes place predominantly within a closely circumscribed community of “gifted educators” cannot, by definition, be the kind of debate and discussion that links gifted education to broader issues of educational equity, school reform, and teacher education. Pointing to journals about gifted education, conferences for gifted educators, organizations for parents of gifted students, and research on the education of gifted students is actually evidence of the insularity of the field and the need to link research and discussion about gifted education to much broader educational and political agendas. Gifted education is an infrequent topic at meetings of the American Educational Research Association, the Association for the Study of Curriculum Development, or the Association for Colleges of Teacher Education, all places where other major debates about educational reform are addressed.

Pain of Gifted Students

Advocates for gifted education are privy to the many ways in which gifted students are made to feel marginalized, rejected, and excluded within current school organizational schemes. They cite children who are made to feel bad about who they are, children who are
friendless and alone, children who hide their talents in a desperate bid for acceptance. I am not unsympathetic to this situation. As a person who cares deeply about how children experience the process of schooling and the ways in which school communities can build acceptance and safety, I am pained by the idea of any child who is rejected, unhappy, or unsupported in school. But focusing on the pain and difficulties of one particular group of students unnecessarily limits our scope and sense of responsibility. I cannot believe that removing some children to a safe haven substantially alters the general classroom community in any long-term, productive way. Unless our goal is to construct schooling so that students labeled “gifted” are completely segregated (gifted classes, gifted lunch, gifted little league, and gifted drama club), then it is imperative that all students learn to accept, respect, and interact with a wide range of other students. Clearly the goal of changing classroom climate and the culture of schools so that all students are accepted and valued is a long-term proposition, and I am not naive about the complexity of the task. Neither am I willing to abandon the goal of heterogeneous classrooms because it is difficult to achieve.

What Constitutes Appropriate Differentiation?

For those who argue that “gifted children” are an easily discernible population with essential characteristics that differ from those of nongifted children, it is easy to believe that qualitatively different educational opportunities are necessary for student success. In fact, there is no research to support the fact that the kinds of educational opportunities currently being provided for students identified as “gifted” would not also be positive for unidentified students or that specialized services cannot be provided within a broader context. Nor should one assume that the worksheets that dominate many classrooms are indeed appropriate to “typical” children either—changing conceptions of best educational practice would confirm that many of the same tasks that frustrate and vex children with exceptionally high skills are also not the best way of teaching students with more typical skills. Only out-dated, lock-stepped ways of viewing curriculum and teaching would have us view the general education classroom as one in which everyone is doing essentially the same thing, at the same pace, and in the same way. Renzulli’s (1994/95) Schoolwide Enrichment Model comes the closest to enacting the belief that many (I would say all) children can be enriched by
curricular opportunities that are exciting, participatory, multimodal, and creative. The gifted students from my daughter’s school, for example, recently put on a play. This is an activity that could easily have included all of the students in the school, involving them in different ways in a wide range of learning experiences. This does not mean that all students would be doing the same thing; researching the background of the play, writing the play, designing scenery, organizing rehearsal schedules, designing and sewing costumes, helping others to learn their lines, composing and performing music—the list of many-layered tasks and opportunities is endless and could engage a whole range of student skills, interests, and performance levels.

It is also a huge mistake to issue blanket statements about “what gifted students need” as though they were, in fact, a coherent, homogeneous group with a unified set of educational needs requiring a generic gifted program. School districts that identify a segment of students as “gifted” and then provide a rigid, undifferentiated curriculum for those students as a block are as guilty of overgeneralization and lack of individualization as many of the regular classrooms from which those students are withdrawn. Finding better ways to describe and define each student’s unique educational requirements [and common needs as well] would benefit all students, including those now labeled “gifted,” “retarded,” or “disturbed.”

**Fear of Abandonment of Gifted Students**

There is genuine and valid concern that if gifted programs are simply abandoned, disbanded in the name of “political correctness” and outside pressure, then the educational needs and services provided to those students currently identified as gifted will be lost in the struggle. This challenge is similar to that faced by schools that are implementing full inclusion and are attempting to return “special education” monies to general funds to pay for more generic services and support. The answer, I believe, lies in accountability and assessment; we need ways of guaranteeing that all students are learning and growing, not ways of calculating how much money was spent on any particular child’s education. In the field of special education, schools have submitted waiver requests so that they can organize their educational services in ways consistent with their belief and commitment to the quality education of all children, eliminating segregated programs, reallocating staff, creating multiage class-
rooms, and so on [Villa et al., 1992]. Other educational reformers are looking at ways of providing excellent education without tracking or grouping [Sizer, 1984; Wheelock, 1992; Darling-Hammond, 1993].

**Equity and Excellence As Competing Agendas**

There are those who view a quest for excellence and a commitment to quality education for all children as mutually exclusive goals and who also believe that we have already attended to equity and can move beyond that goal to excellence [Heritage Foundation, 1984]. This simply isn't so. Never before has our society been as segregated; there is more racial segregation in our schools now than there was when Brown v. Board of Education was decided in 1954 [Kozol, 1991]. We are increasingly becoming a nation of have's and have-not's, and an unprecedented number of children live in poverty. We are a long way from achieving even marginally equitable education for all children.

I have described gifted education as a form of educational triage—a decision about how different children will be treated that results in sacrificing and abandoning those considered less capable or less worthy of investment [Sapon-Shevin, 1987, 1990, 1994]. Charles Derber (1995), in an article entitled "The Politics of Triage: The Contract with America's Surplus Populations" argues that the United States is currently engaged in economic, political, and cultural triage:

Economic triage can be seen in the withdrawal of viable employment or liveable wages from sectors of the labor force, creating surplus populations with no economic prospects. Cultural triage is manifest in intellectuals' embrace of ideologies that explicitly justify the abandonment or elimination of surplus populations. Political triage involves the explicit decision-making by government leaders to stop assisting—with money, housing, or other services—the abandoned groups. [p. 37]

Viewing the intersection between these other forms of triage and educational triage makes it imperative that we not conceptualize excellence and equity as competing agendas. If we do, we will all lose. We cannot withdraw resources from the most needy. Trickle-down economics has not worked and neither has the belief that providing a good education to some children will somehow transform the education of all children. Rather, we have to explore excellence within the context of equity. How can we achieve success for all students? What must school communities look like? Derber (1995) warns:
Triage, like war, perversely offers the promise of solidarity based on mobilizing against a common enemy, in this case the enemy within. . . . Until we respond to our needs for both economic security and moral awakening with a positive vision of community, the politics of triage will loom as a barbaric surrogate. (p. 88)

Wide-Scale Reform Is Hopeless

It is not uncommon for supporters of gifted education to agree with the basic premise that much of what happens in gifted programs might be extended to all students, that gifted programs as they are currently constituted often separate children in unnecessary and sometimes overtly harmful ways, and even that current conceptions of giftedness need to be substantially altered. But these acknowledgements are generally followed by a statement that says that, although it would be nice, even desirable, if we could reinvent schools and curriculum so that all students were well served, challenged, nurtured, and supported, this kind of massive, systemic restructuring is simply impractical, unrealistic, and inevitably doomed to failure. Arguing from a sinking-ship mentality—the ship is going down, how do we save “our” kids?—many gifted educators are extremely pessimistic about the possibility of change. I do not disagree that the number and magnitude of the changes required to really create schools that serve all children well, including students identified as “gifted or talented,” is overwhelming. I do feel that it is crucial to hold out a vision of that possibility as our shared goal, even as we work towards partial and stop-gap solutions. We cannot wait until the whole system is “fixed” in order to meet the needs of gifted students. But neither can we construct gifted education in ways that make it less likely that we achieve the systemic, whole-school restructuring that is necessary.

Future Directions: Finding a Common Agenda

What needs to happen? Educational reform can seem overwhelming. There are so many different agendas, an incredible list of stakeholders, and numerous sites of struggle and negotiation. Although the burden for creating a shared agenda should not fall exclusively (or even largely) on gifted educators, many of the learnings from gifted education—particularly the importance of flexibility, creativity, and multiple approaches in defining problems and seeking solutions—
could provide important, catalytic impetus to change. What stance could those whose typical interests have been in education of the gifted take that would allow them to work in concert with general education reformers and others interested in school change? The following research, practice, and policy agendas could point us towards areas of shared concern and insure that time is not wasted on in-fighting and mutual denunciation.

Join Gifted Teacher Education Programs with General Teacher Education Programs

Maintaining discrete departments or programs of gifted education and separate teacher preparation structures designed to prepare teachers to work with "gifted students" perpetuates false dualities that do a disservice to general education teachers and decrease the probability that all teachers will feel themselves responsible for and capable of educating gifted students. One of the lessons to emerge from the movement to fully include students with disabilities in typical classrooms has been that if general educators are led to believe (or taught directly) that "it takes a special person to work with those kids," then they are systematically disempowered and deskilled, their enthusiasm for and commitment to stretching themselves to work with all students diminished. Just as many colleges of education are now closely examining their regular education teacher preparation programs and their special education teacher preparation programs by looking for places and ways to merge, a similar effort must take place in the area of gifted education. And, ideally, this should not be manifested in requiring that all regular education teachers complete a course in "Teaching the Gifted Child" but in the inclusion of strategies, curriculum, and resources related to highly skilled or advanced students within all aspects of teacher education. If, for example, all methods courses routinely included information on multilevel instruction, multiple intelligences, and ways of adapting and modifying instruction relative to students' individual learning needs, then the general quality of teaching would improve in the regular classroom and make it far less likely that gifted students would need to be removed in order to have their needs met. We must change the ways in which we prepare "regular" classroom teachers so that they expect to teach in heterogeneous classrooms, welcome the challenge, and have been given the skills and inclination to work well with a wide range of learners.
Change the Nature and Quality of Regular Classroom Instruction

If the question is "Are students identified as gifted currently being adequately served in most regular classrooms?" the answer is "Probably not." If the question is modified to read, "Could regular classrooms be organized in such a way that the needs of gifted students could be met there?" then the answer is a cautious but enthusiastic "Yes." It is important to add that these changes would benefit all students, not just those identified as "gifted and talented." How would classrooms need to change in order to support the educational needs of students identified as "gifted" (and all other students as well):

A Positive Commitment to Diversity and Heterogeneity. If we enthusiastically embraced heterogeneous classrooms as the ideal learning communities rather than bemoaning the range of skills and interests in one room, then it would be easier to support the unique needs of students whose skills are accelerated or diverge from more typical interests. If that commitment to diversity carried over into a commitment to creating a cohesive, inclusive, supportive classroom community in which calling a child "egg head" or "teacher's pet" was no more acceptable than calling another child "nigger" or "fag-got," then we could better envision students identified as "gifted" as accepted, and welcomed members of the classroom community.

Diversified/Multilevel Curricula. If our curricula were conceptualized in order to honor multiple intelligences, take advantage of multiple areas of skill or interest, and support learning at a variety of levels and through a range of learning modalities, then it would be far easier to support gifted learners. When the class is studying World War II, students could read books at different levels, write plays, build dioramas, design role plays and simulations, interview war veterans, and so on. Students whose skills are advanced could be guided towards meaningful educational experiences that take advantage of their interests and challenge their weaknesses.

Changes in Pedagogy: Cooperative Learning and Peer Support. If teachers consistently implemented participatory, hands-on, collaborative, interactive teaching strategies, then students identified as "gifted" would find themselves engaged and challenged by both the content and by the requirements for social engagement, peer teaching, and interpersonal support. Rather than being either bored by the teacher's slow pace or consistently forced to be the "junior teacher" for other less-advanced students, instruction needs to be constructed
in a way that permits students to work together, support one another, and still be challenged.

More Support for Classroom Teachers. Currently, some regular classroom teachers are relieved when students identified as “gifted” are removed from their classrooms to receive services elsewhere. Already overburdened by the demands of classroom teaching, they do not feel they have adequate time or resources to commit to students with diverse needs. If, however, resource teachers and gifted and talented teachers had their jobs defined as supporting typical classroom teachers through curriculum development, providing resources, co-teaching, and collaboration, then regular classroom teachers might be more willing to change their teaching and curriculum in order to meet the diverse needs of gifted learners.

All of these changes would not only better support gifted learners in regular classrooms (by redefining what we mean by regular classroom), but they would move us closer to creating schools that are rich and exciting for all students and nourish individual needs within a cooperative, nurturing, classroom community.

Extend the Best Thinking About What Gifted Students Need to All Students

My challenge to gifted educators would be to use a working assumption that good teaching is good teaching and that many of the programs, strategies, and activities currently implemented for gifted students could be productively implemented for all students at some level. I am not arguing that all students can work at the same level but that many of the same activities provided for gifted students could be provided for all students with adequate support, modification, and buttressing.

If we could apply these assumptions about the similarities between gifted students and all other students to developing shared teaching and research agendas, many of the current competitions and seeming incompatibilities between groups could be eliminated. What are some of the research questions we might want to address:

1. How is instruction best organized so that students are able to pursue individual teaching agendas within a shared framework?
2. What kinds of assessment strategies help teachers to know and plan for individual learners within heterogeneous classrooms?
3. What are the most efficient, effective ways of using the skills of
gifted teachers to support the learning of gifted students in heterogeneous classrooms?

4. What models of teacher education best prepare teachers with the skills, attitudes, and desires to work with gifted students within the context of heterogeneous classrooms?

5. What kinds of curricula can be designed that can be implemented in a wide range of ways at different skill levels?

6. How can community support for education be solicited so that there are adequate educational resources for all students?

7. What kinds of administrative support best facilitates the productive collaboration between gifted and regular education programs and teachers?

8. How can classrooms be organized so that all students feel valued and acknowledged, safe and supported in their learning and their interpersonal relationships?

Seeking answers to these questions could help gifted educators find areas of connection and overlap with other educational researchers, teacher educators, and policy analysts. Through the construction of a shared agenda of research, teaching, and policy development, gifted education advocates could insure the viability and long-term success of their efforts and could build important bridges across institutional gaps and philosophical chasms.

References


