

Integrative Program Policy for the Gifted: Continuum or Dichotomy?

Colin J. Laine

university of western ontario

Stanley S. Blank

university of british columbia

In a dichotomous view, "gifted" children are distinguished from the rest. A dichotomous approach to programming for gifted children makes such programs vulnerable to external forces (shifts in government spending priority, for instance). Vagueness in defining "giftedness" makes planning difficult, produces shifts in evaluative criteria, and jeopardizes program integration. A nondichotomous or "continuous" view, based on assessment of all students' needs, provides a more consistent basis for administrative, instructional, and evaluative decision making.

L'approche dichotomique a pour caractéristique de distinguer les enfants "doués" des autres enfants. Dans un tel contexte, les programmes pour les enfants doués peuvent être affectés par divers facteurs externes (nouvelles priorités du gouvernement, par exemple). L'imprécision de la définition de la "douance" complique la planification, entraîne l'apparition de nouveaux critères d'évaluation et compromet l'intégration des programmes. Une approche non dichotomique ou globale, qui tient compte de l'évaluation des besoins de tous les élèves, fournit une base solide aux décisions de nature administrative ou ayant trait à la pédagogie et à l'évaluation.

Government-funded programs for extraordinary learners usually provide services to an exclusive group of students selected to participate on the basis of a policy or of a statutory criterion. The most common criterion is an achievement test score or an IQ score (Alvino, McDonnell, & Richert, 1981; Clark, 1983; Gallagher, 1985; Gallagher, Weiss, Oglesby, & Thomas, 1983; Renzulli, 1977; Renzulli, Reis, & Smith, 1981; Yarbrough & Johnson, 1984).

Many American statutes make an IQ score of 130 (two standard deviations above the norm) the sole criterion for inclusion in programs for gifted students. Below this baseline, students would not be eligible for state-funded programs; nor would they be considered "gifted." Other labels for the marginal include "bright," "highly able," "academically proficient"—but not "gifted." This has led to a "gifted/not gifted" dichotomy.

This dichotomy results from

1. external expectations (mandates, policies)
2. exclusive instrumentation (mostly academic achievement)
3. cut-off points (often arbitrarily set; e.g., IQ 130—Title VII in California).

Because such external factors as funding are decisive, schools and boards have often used screening processes and devices to provide an over-inclusive quota of eligible children to attract special funding (Kitchen, 1979; Peel, 1981). Individuals are secondary to administrative considerations.

Administrators will not actively delineate individual learning aptitudes, nor spend limited funds to refine programs. By 1985, fewer than four per cent of the programs for gifted students in the province of British Columbia had ever been evaluated (British Columbia Ministry of Education, 1985).

Consequences of these funding arrangements include

1. *exclusivity*: "elitism" is a strong reactive factor in the education of gifted learners. It has delayed or arrested implementation of new programs in many states and provinces;
2. *segregation* (either real or perceived) has reinforced the perception of elitism held by opponents of specialized programming;
3. *the mystique* of jargon and specialized curricula has helped to cloud the issues, especially among parents, of identification and selection procedures;
4. *add-on* programs are perceived as unrelated to regular practices and can easily be deleted or ignored.

Programs facing such difficulties can provide only a weak foundation for development of sound and transferable learning strategies. Funding determines the life expectancy of the special program. When Title VII money was withdrawn in the United States (1983) many programs immediately disappeared. Had the rationale for services been articulated and accepted as sound educational practice with defined learning outcomes, such sudden disappearances would have been less probable (Passow, 1985).

ONE PROVINCE'S EXPERIENCE

An example of a sensible theoretical foundation is province-wide programming for gifted children in British Columbia (Blank, 1981; Laine, 1983). The policy had two aspects: a desire to avoid the consequences noted above, and the wish to provide services to children in disparate geographic and educational circumstances. New financing for programming was not available at the outset and this was both a benefit and a detriment.

The lack of new financing was a benefit since funding criteria were not established at first. This gave administrators and program designers greater flexibility in establishing program criteria and identification procedures. It was a detriment in that implementation of new programs coincided with a general government policy of financial restraint. Whatever was to be implemented was to be done with declining school budgets. Administrators were not easily convinced of the need for special programs for gifted children. Implementation proceeded very cautiously.

British Columbia's policy aimed to achieve four goals, and to share responsibility with districts. The Ministry of Education assisted districts to develop programs whose goals were typical of those in most jurisdictions:

1. To identify, through application of effective criteria, the needs of individual children requiring "enrichment" or "gifted learner's" programming.
2. To apply appropriate instructional and organizational strategies.
3. To identify and/or develop learning materials appropriate to needs, to the strategies identified, and to the context.
4. To identify and to provide appropriate support services. (British Columbia, 1982)

"Enrichment" was described as learning experiences extending from the regular program that would be provided occasionally as need arose. Programs for the "gifted" would include specific and ongoing interventions for individual students, extending from enrichment through to a separate curriculum where needed. Within this general framework, school districts have had to develop specific statements of intent to guide locally developed programs.

The premise of the stated goals was that learning needs identified in gifted children can be translated into specific educational objectives that can be acted upon. From the outset, gifted students were considered to have certain learning needs which differ in degree and dimension from the rest of the population, and which were not usually satisfied by regular programs. Rather than absolute criteria, "needs" were to be viewed on a continuum of intensity. For practical purposes, the British Columbia (1982) policy divided the educational needs of gifted students into three categories:

1. the need to develop certain necessary and identifiable skills;
2. the need for the opportunity and guidance to use very high degrees of skill;
3. the need for personal support services.

The purpose of special programming was to provide extraordinary learners with educational experiences and skills to become more independent managers of their own education (Laine, Blank, & Clarke, 1985). This meant boards would identify specific skills that learned required in order to become

independent. Using screening and selection procedures, teachers would be able to identify skills to be taught. Skills already present should expand. Finally, some students' primary need would be for counselling, rather than instructional services. None of these services would be offered in isolation. The greater the needs, the more intensive or extensive the educational response.

Where regular programs were unable to meet needs, the special program should provide necessary enhancement. Most programming would supplement the regular program and complement students' needs. In a few cases, replacing the regular program with an individualized program would be the best response, although such a decision would depend on the intensity of student need and the capacity of the system to respond appropriately. An "Enrichment-Gifted Education" continuum evolves from the regular classroom situation. This theoretical position became the ideal in British Columbia.

Any new plan or policy for educating the gifted requires that the educational community first accept that gifted students have identifiable learning needs and that these needs require special attention in the school system. The task of all jurisdictions has been to translate the theoretical ideal into an operational reality. The key is provided in most states and provinces by administrative and theoretical statements already in government policy manuals, for example: "major educational goal [is] . . . to enable each student to realize maximum potential as an individual and as a member of society" (British Columbia, 1983) or "To develop gifted children into intellectually and creatively capable, productive, and compassionate human beings" (Fontana Unified School District, California, n.d.).

If schools are not realizing these high goals, it behooves the educational community to undertake an inquiry in three stages.

Philosophic Stage

If the school system does not currently provide the optimum environment, the question is "Should we do anything about it?"

Some in the educational community believe the system should not specially recognize or offer special services to gifted children (Burroughs, 1977; Clark, 1983). This prior question must be openly debated in schools and districts before students are subjected to screening procedures, and before teachers spend time, energy and money on programming and materials. A school staff may decide that, given demands made on them, other groups or individuals in the school (for instance, learning disabled, hearing impaired) have a greater priority. Whether the school or district eventually does provide some special program or not, the educational community at least will have identified and delineated its position.

Pragmatic Stage

“What needs to be done?” The response will depend upon students’ identified learning needs and characteristics. Needs and responses must be agreed, operationally defined, and prioritized. Priority will be shaped by the intensity and frequency of characteristics within the parameter of local educational theory and policy. The district now knows the challenges it faces. Students are present, learning capacities are identified, and the responses are known.

Physical Stage

“To which needs can the school or district respond?” Since resources—financial, human, physical—are limited, the school system must accept that some identifiable needs cannot be immediately and appropriately accommodated.

The school must now adopt priorities, an administrative matter. Identification of learning needs, and selection of students for the program, are kept distinct.

One of the most significant barriers to effective implementation has been the lack of parent and teacher awareness of program placement. It is unlikely that a school or district can provide a complete range of responses appropriate to all the children identified as gifted. Where these various stages have been consciously adopted, however, there has been less backlash from disgruntled parents or teachers about why certain students were included and others were not.

Educational literature over the past sixty years has stressed the importance of administrative support, understanding, and commitment if educational services are to flourish (cf. Catty, 1923; Dewey, 1930; Gallagher, Weiss, Oglesby, & Thomas, 1983; Nunn, 1946; Stephens, 1967). Recently, administrators have been reactionary in their implementation of programs for gifted students. However, most writers claim that the school administrator sets the tone and is the key to innovation in education. Through the approach outlined above, an administrator can readily identify the reasons for any placement. School and family can work together to explore possible alternatives that may be found outside the school or the (public) education system.

Writers have been struck in the past by the speed at which educators move toward the idea that if we cannot do anything right now (given such factors as extra finance, extra teachers) there is little point in spending time on the matter (Boston, 1980). Running directly to the “can/cannot” dichotomy arrests expansion—often indefinitely. During expansion of educational opportunities, there has been a rush to get programs in place to show that schools are responding.

Experience has shown that sooner or later theoretical issues come to haunt

programs (Laine, 1983; Passow, 1985). To avoid this, we propose a model that assumes differentiation of instruction. This does not discount the importance of special services, which are as critical to gifted students as they are to any other special education group.

THE MODEL

Our proposed program management model is shown below (Figure 3). It is formed of three distinct but integrated stages: the Administrative Stage, the Instructional Context, and Evaluation. Each part of the system is essential to successful programming. The decision what and how to offer programs to students should be taken in light of activities most likely to produce effective learning and how learning will be evaluated. Management is presented as a partnership among administrators, teachers, and evaluators to provide greater working flexibility in a continuum of services. Teachers who feel supported and encouraged tend to offer the most exciting and flexible programs.

Administrative Stage

Each issue contributes to the establishment of the program. The three components, "Philosophy," "Learning Needs," and "Resources," interact to provide the administrator with programming options. These options are choices that can be implemented within given constraints. These choices are then translated into an "Instructional Context." The purpose of the program is articulated in terms of goals and learning objectives. These in turn lead to identification of needed resources; to writing or examining the curriculum; and to planning activities that should advance the objectives of the program. Effective program implementation, however, occurs within a whole system, within which administration is but one part.

Instructional Context

The implementation of the Instructional Context involves the interaction of three main instructional components shown in the second part of the management diagram (Figure 3). "Differentiated curriculum" for gifted children continues to be an elusive concept in many educators' minds. The sub-elements of the instructional context shown here are patterned after Kaplan's model of curriculum differentiation (Kaplan, 1974). Many practitioners who use this model tend to think of only three of these sub-elements: contents, processes, and products.

The proposed model divides differentiating elements into two classes:

Curriculum and Strategies. It groups Objectives, Scope, and Content together as curricular elements, and groups Style, Process, and Products together as strategies. "Style/Process/Product" is analogous to "Contents/Operations/Products" from Guilford's (1967) Structure of Intellect Model. This provides practitioners with a channel for ongoing assessment, monitoring and evaluation of teaching and learning strategies (cf. Laine, Blank, & Clarke, 1985). Program designers and resource teachers can modify one or more elements in either or both classes to provide teachers with greater flexibility in their teaching strategies. The students thus should have greater opportunity to exercise a variety of abilities.

An integration of curriculum and personal learning style is entirely possible (Gregorc, 1979; Renzulli, Reis, & Smith, 1981).

The third element—Special Services—is those services which are not necessarily intrinsic to the instruction. Counselling, special health, and mentoring services may help a few gifted students and provide support not only to children but also to teachers. Many gifted students require these services better to understand themselves socially and emotionally (Blackburn & Erickson, 1986). To date, these specialized services have been least in evidence in gifted programming (Gallagher, Weiss, Oglesby, & Thomas, 1983).

"Differentiation" and "Support" are not absolute features. Instruction can be differentiated both in degree and dimension. For example, some students may need a different approach to curriculum content, others may need an in-depth view or may need different content from that in the regular curriculum; still others may need a different means of expressing their knowledge. The most common feature found in programs for enrichment and the gifted tends to be the development of Process or Learning Skills. The most favoured programs offered, especially at the elementary level, focus almost exclusively on process (cognitive) skill development within a resource room environment (Gallagher, Weiss, Oglesby & Thomas, 1983). For many programs, "Process" is the curriculum.

Renzulli has argued extensively (1980, 1981) that "process curriculum" is doomed to failure if founded upon nothing. Without a confirmed knowledge base, processing occurs in a vacuum. If process is altered radically while content and products remain unchanged, students may have trouble seeing the purpose of activities, or exercising newly acquired skills. Transfer of problem-solving strategies will be discouraged (Gallagher, Weiss, Oglesby, & Thomas, 1983). If instruction is to be differentiated, one or more of the subelements in each class must be modified or extended to provide the learner with an intellectual challenge. The degree or dimension of the modification or extension will be determined by students' needs and by the teacher's

ability to meet those needs in his own teaching style. The choice of the resources and of the activities is, therefore, a result of decisions which lie on a continuum extending from the regular to a separate curriculum.

Evaluation

Because activities are selected in a context of goals and objectives, their results (products) can readily be evaluated, as can effects of support services. Evaluation, especially formative evaluation, is critical to any program's development. The essential question is whether or not decisions, instructional choices, or strategies have made a significant difference in what happens to the students. If gains from participating could be reasonably predicted from the program's stated purposes, and are transferable, then the program has accomplished its task. If not, then the program's effectiveness may be reassessed so future interventions can be made more reliably. This should result in revised learning and program needs: which brings the reader full circle.

SUMMARY

Practically, our approach is educationally sound and would be cost effective in the long term. Its primary function is to focus attention on the system—the environment into which all the students are placed—so that whatever is provided for gifted students is not so esoteric as to be divorced from their daily lives. Rather, they are a continuum of educational experiences springing from basic programs with consequences critical both to the life of the program and to the lives of the students.

Students maintain a sense of belonging in a larger school community; their special program integrates with the rest of their education. The purpose and objectives are known and understood by everyone involved. Finally, the special program is integral to the school aims, policies and practices: everyone has some ownership in all programs of the school.

The most important factor is to provide an inservice plan for both administrators and teachers. Administrators should know what the plan is and what it will mean for their schools and students. They need to know what choices are possible and how best to use the strengths of their existing programs and their teachers. The vital element of teachers' education is their comprehension of the students they are working with, what they have to work with, and how they will be able to provide for expansion of their curriculum and teaching strategies. Many jurisdictions in the U.S. and Canada have found that the key lies in knowing how to differentiate the curriculum.

The goal is a program of education for gifted learners so integrated into the fabric of school life that it does not stand out as separate. It becomes a natural component of school provision for all.

REFERENCES

- Alvino, J., McDonnell, R. C., & Richert, S. (1981). National survey of identification practices in gifted and talented education. *Exceptional Children*, 48, 124–132.
- Blackburn, A. C., & Erickson, D. B. (1986). Predictable crises of the gifted child. *Journal of Counseling and Development*, 64, 552–555.
- Blank, S. S. (1981). *Gifted program curriculum project*. Unpublished manuscript, University of British Columbia, Vancouver, BC.
- Boston, B. O. (1980). Starting a gifted program. In B. O. Boston & J. Orloff (Eds.), *Preparing to teach the gifted and talented: A guide to personnel development*. Fairfax, VA: Wordsmith Publishers.
- British Columbia Ministry of Education. (1982). *Enrichment and gifted education resource book*. Victoria, BC: Ministry of Education.
- British Columbia Ministry of Education. (1983). *Administration manual*. Victoria, BC: Ministry of Education.
- British Columbia Ministry of Education. (1985). *Annual Report*. Victoria, BC: Ministry of Education.
- Burroughs, M. C. (1977). *Restraints on excellence*. Hingham, MA: Teaching Resources Corporation.
- Catty, N. (1923). *A first book of teaching*. London: Methuen.
- Clark, B. (1983). *Growing up gifted* (2nd ed.). Columbus, OH: Merrill.
- Dewey, J. (1938). *Experience and education*. New York: Macmillan.
- Gallagher, J. J. (1985). *Teaching the gifted child* (3rd ed.). Newton, MA: Allyn & Bacon.
- Gallagher, J., Weiss, P., Oglesby, K., & Thomas, T. (1983). *The status of gifted education in the United States*. Los Angeles: National/State Leadership Institute for Gifted/Talented.
- Gregorc, A. (1979). Editorial-Learning/teaching styles: Potent forces behind them. *Educational Leadership*, 36, 234–236.
- Guilford, J. P. (1967). *Nature of human intelligence*. New York: McGraw-Hill.
- Kaplan, S. (1974). *Providing programs for gifted and talented*. Ventura County, CA: Office of Superintendent for Schools.
- Kitchen, B. (1979). Special education and inequality. *Interchange*, 10 (3), 77–84.
- Laine, C. J. (1983). The implementation of gifted education in B.C.: A sketch of one province's experience. *B.C. Journal of Special Education*, 7, 153–162.
- Laine, C. J., Blank, S. S., & Clarke, B. (1985). Guilford's Structure of Intellect: An indicator of learning styles in gifted learners. *Canadian Journal of Special Education*, 1, 157–170.
- Nunn, P. (1945). *Education: Its data and first principles*. London: Methuen.
- Peel Board of Education. (1981). *Report re: Bill 82, amendments to the education act*. Mississauga, ON: Author.
- Renzulli, J. (1977). Two approaches to identification of gifted students. *Exceptional Children*, 43, 512–518.
- Renzulli, J. (1980). Will gifted education be alive and well in 1990? *Gifted Child Quarterly*, 24, 3–9.
- Renzulli, J., Reis, S. M., & Smith, L. M. (1981). *The revolving door identification model*. Mansfield Center, CT: Creative Learning Press.

Stephens, J. M. (1967). *The process of schooling*. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston.
Yarborough, B. H., & Johnson, R. A. (1983). Identifying the gifted: A theory-practice gap. *Gifted Child Quarterly*, 27, 135–138.

Bei einer zweigeteilten Betrachtungsweise werden "begabte" Kinder von den anderen unterschieden. Ein zweigeteilter Ansatz bei Programmen äußere Einflüsse anfällig (z.B. Prioritätsverlagerungen im Regierungshaushalt). Eine verschwommene Definition von "Begabung" erschwert die Planung, ruft Veränderungen der Bewertungskriterien hervor und gefährdet die Programmintegration.

Eine nicht zweigeteilte oder "kontinuierliche" Sicht, die auf der Einschätzung der Bedürfnisse aller Schüler beruht, bietet eine übereinstimmendere Basis für administrative, unterrichtsbezogene Entscheidungen, sowie für Entscheidungen in der Leistungsbeurteilung.

Como una dicotomía "los niños excepcionales" se distinguen de otros niños. Este punto de vista considera los programas para niños excepcionales vulnerables a circunstancias externas (cambios en la política del gobierno, por ejemplo) o la ambigüedad en la definición de "Excepcionalidad" haciendo difícil la planificación. Cambios en el criterio de evaluación ponen en peligro la integración del programa. Un punto de vista de no dicotomía o "continuo" se basa en la evaluación de la necesidad de los estudiantes, provee una base consistente para la administración, la instrucción y la evaluación de las decisiones.

Stanley S. Blank is professor, Educational Psychology and Special Education, Faculty of Education, University of British Columbia, Vancouver, British Columbia V6T 1Z5 and Colin J. Laine is lecturer, Educational Psychology and Special Education, Faculty of Education, University of Western Ontario, London, Ontario N6G 1G7.