

An Innovative University Project to Provide Leadership for the Education of Gifted and Talented Children

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This paper discusses the design and implementation of a three-year project at the University of Lethbridge funded by Alberta Advanced Education through a Gifted and Talented Education Project Grant.

Dans cet article, l'auteur explique la conception et l'implantation d'un projet de l'Université de Lethbridge sur l'éducation des doués, projet qui s'échelonne sur trois ans et qui est subventionné par Alberta Advanced Education.

In an essay about gifted education over the past 30 years, Abraham J. Tannenbaum (1986) reflected on professionals' ineffectiveness in changing policy for the education of gifted learners. Professors speak and write for other academics but do not venture outside their circle to influence those involved in public action. School staffs take reactive rather than proactive stances and do not challenge the ablest students. Progress, Tannenbaum observed, has resulted mainly from parental pressure or government policy.

Neuman (1981) argued that if programs of education for gifted and talented learners are to become stronger and more independent of shifting resources and political change, it is up to the educational community to provide leadership. The Faculty of Education at the University of Lethbridge wishes to encourage both leadership in education of the gifted, and professional initiatives in schools and universities. Its recent project in this area had a broad mandate to undertake anything feasible and timely to promote education of the gifted and talented in schools. The objectives, activities, and outcomes of the project were described in a workplan (see Appendix 1.)

Once the three-year project was authorized and funded, a project coordinator began its development, identifying its aims and emphases. Project reports to the funding agency, Alberta Advanced Education, were to provide information about project development and activities undertaken to achieve

it goals. A summative evaluation was planned as the final report on the project.

The project has four characteristics that should lead to professional initiatives in the education of gifted and talented learners in schools and universities.

GOALS

Project staff began their work with current needs assessment information in hand, identifying constraints and opportunities, and working with interested representatives of stakeholder groups.

Limited But Lengthy Project Time-Line

This project was designed on a three-year term with opportunity for renewal to allow flexibility and diversity, to permit developmental work, and yet to impose eventual closure and synthesis.

Time, Budget, and University Support

Although a number of Canadian education faculty members are specialists in the education of gifted and talented learners, they are constrained by full-time teaching and administrative commitments from broader involvement in the school community. Research or development projects must be planned in detail long in advance to be eligible for grants to pay project expenses and to buy release time from faculty assignments. The quantity and complexity of work entailed in the grant application process encourages applicants to limit rather than to extend the number of schools and individuals in the project.

Working within the limits of a modest budget and with the active cooperation of all concerned, our project “buys time” for university professionals to explore, to design, and to implement activities that contribute to education of gifted learners in schools. The university offers further support through access to facilities, systems, resource people, and staff.

Mandate Without Authority

The project has a mandate to accomplish a variety of objectives but has no authority in the schools or university. Therefore, it can act only when invited and where effective implementation and lasting impact are most likely. Professionals working in the project are thus likely to undertake genuinely productive educational activity. And they are likely to find ready support and

assistance from the project. Because of the project's diverse objectives and its lack of formal authority, the project staff maintain a high level of project-school communication that alerts them to opportunities for cooperation.

The project's broad mandate and expectations give its components special potency. The project has the responsibility to disseminate and to provide access to its products and findings among schools and universities affiliated with the project. This ensures the project will have impact beyond its implementation sites.

The project aimed to increase defensible activity in the education of gifted learners in schools, but in a way that decreased dependency on the project itself. Development of local leadership and packaged resources was thus essential. The first teachers to take two courses on the education of gifted learners became a leadership group. They served as facilitators in a heavily-enrolled institute on the education of the gifted. They developed audio-visual materials on professional development. They became sponsor teachers for students completing specialized practica. They initiated and conducted a gifted children's summer camp. They selected items for control collections of commercial materials for programs. The early identification and development of a leadership group facilitated many Project activities.

Communication was itself critically important. All participants found it valuable that project members visited schools to assist in whatever way—by offering, for example, workshops and consultation. Cooperative research and development projects grew out of this pattern of communication.

The project would have worked better with either a larger budget, or an initial commitment from school jurisdictions to sponsor teacher participation in project activities. Teachers often had difficulty acquiring release time to participate in research, evaluation, development, or professional development activities.

A project concept would vary greatly from one university and school jurisdiction to another. Needs, constraints, and opportunities would dictate different activities, and different formats or systems for those activities. It is unreasonable, however, to expect that the best-developed ideas and methods in education for gifted children will sure-footedly find their ways into schools without the stimulus of projects such as this.

This project illustrates how a faculty of education can provide leadership in professional activity in schools and universities for the advancement of education of gifted learners in schools. Professionals in both contexts need access to resources, and time to meld their knowledge and understandings.

REFERENCES

- Neuman, D. B. (1981). It's time to get together on gifted programs. *Curriculum Review*, 8, 114–117.

Tannenbaum, A. J. (1986). Editorial: Reflection and refraction of light on the gifted. *Roeper Review*, 8, 212-218.

In diesem Artikel werden Modell und Ausführung eines dreijährigen Projekts an der University of Lethbridge untersucht. Finanziert wurde das Projekt durch Alberta Advanced Education im Rahmen von Untersuchungen zur Erziehung von Begabten und Talentierten.

Este estudio es producto del diseño y la implementación de un proyecto de tres años en la universidad de Lethbridge patrocinado por el centro de Estudios avanzados de Alberta a través de una subvención del proyecto de educación exepcional.

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APPENDIX 1

Project Workplan

<i>Project Objectives</i>	<i>Project Activities</i>
1. To investigate an instructional model(s) for the gifted (e.g., Taylor's Multiple Talent Approach, Renzulli's Enrichment Triad, Williams' Teaching Strategies for Thinking and Feeling, Creative Problem Solving, etc.)	• literature searches • on-site investigations of model programs elsewhere • Working with external consultants • studying and devising appropriate strategies for incorporating gifted instructional models in schools
2. Utilizing the principles of selected model(s), to develop an action plan for the ongoing professional development of educators within the University and school system.	• performing needs assessments of the present attitudes and skill levels of educators in schools and in the Faculty of Education • preparing directories of human and other resources for the training of teachers • developing training materials to be used in a variety of delivery systems • exploring and piloting a number of delivery systems for practising teachers • developing and piloting of professional development courses and programs, both credit and non-credit • developing leadership programs at the post-baccalaureate level

APPENDIX 1 (concluded)

<i>Project Objectives</i>	<i>Project Activities</i>
3. To develop an action plan for the preservice education of teachers of the gifted and talented.	• raising the level of awareness of Education Faculty members as well as students • developing and piloting materials, units, courses, programs and delivery strategies within the basic University of Lethbridge teacher preparation program • exploring the delivery of specialized practica • developing special summer school institutes using resident and invited expertise
4. To develop, pilot, monitor and evaluate effective and exemplary mainstream programs for the gifted in Alberta schools in close cooperation with Alberta schools and school jurisdictions.	• cooperating with and assisting local school jurisdictions in the development, piloting, and implementation of programs for the identification and teaching of the gifted/talented • consulting regularly with local schools and school jurisdictions • consulting with an Advisory Committee consisting of faculty members selected on the basis of expertise/interest and local school jurisdiction representatives in order to ensure project success and its impact on schools
5. To ensure effective articulation among the four Faculties of Education in Alberta in the area of the gifted and talented.	• establish and maintain a provincial advisory committee on the gifted/talented comprised of representatives from each of the Faculties of Education, Alberta Education and Alberta Advanced Education in order to: • obtain on-going consultative support for the project, and • act as a communication mechanism among the represented agencies
6. To evaluate the effectiveness of the project.	• appointing an Evaluator (Evaluation Committee) acceptable to Alberta Advanced Education and the Faculty of Education • approving an evaluation design and methodology
7. To assure the continuation of the meritorious facets of the project after formal funding support terminates.	• piloting of and implementing various strategies for teaching teachers of the gifted/talented in the Faculty's teacher education and professional development programs • initiate the process of ensuring continuing faculty expertise on the gifted/talented in the Faculty by encouraging that a future position(s) is dedicated to the gifted