Educating the Gifted and Talented: An Agenda for the Future

To serve all gifted students, we must broaden identification methods, develop more and varied types of programs, and provide comprehensive teacher training.
As we look toward the last decade of this century, it is clear that we must continue to focus our attention on educating our gifted and talented students. Despite recent gains in the quality of programs for these students, we have a long way to go. Many gifted and talented students still go unrecognized, unserved, and underserved in our schools. Special populations, such as the handicapped and culturally diverse, remain underrepresented in the programs that do exist. The great majority of programs serve students with high academic abilities; those focusing on creativity, the arts, and leadership are far less frequent.

Most troubling is the lack of evaluation data that measure the extent to which programs are actually doing a good job of educating these students. Some 26 states have mandated programs to provide services for gifted students; 21 more have permissive legislation (Houseman 1988). But the resulting programs appear to be of uneven quality and quantity. In a landmark study, Cox and her colleagues (1985) investigated types of programs for the gifted and talented and the extent to which these programs were "substantial." They reported that a large variety of programs were offered, but those offered most often—part-time special classes and enrichment—were less often rated substantial. In order to build stronger programs for these children, educators must strengthen identification methods, teacher preparation, and programs.

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Identification Methods
A major source of concern is the identification of students. Students from culturally different backgrounds, students with handicapping conditions, students from sparsely populated areas, and gifted girls still face barriers that often preclude their participation in such programs. To ensure equal access for these students, we must first heighten awareness that gifted students exist in these populations—not all gifted students act appropriately, wear clean clothes, live in two-parent homes, or attend schools in which the textbooks are up to date.

Further, we must intensify our efforts to discover a broader range of students' abilities. Intelligence tests are no longer sufficient to identify gifted and talented students; less "objective" measures—observations, products, and interviews—can be entered into the identification equation as meaningful sources of data.

Teacher Preparation
An equally serious problem is teacher preparation. The unique needs of gifted students dictate the necessity for teachers to have additional training and certification in this specialty. Only 19 states offer teacher certification to specially trained teachers; many provide just a course or two, and the large majority do not require certification. Moreover, since the gifted can be found in almost every classroom, it is essential that basic teacher preparation include content on these students.

Program Mosaics
Finally, programs must be more fully differentiated. The works of Gardner (1983) and Sternberg (1986) have reinforced the premise—multiple abilities and intelligences—as the basis for today's definitions of giftedness and talent. Gifted students have varying strengths and weaknesses, and no one course of study can accommodate the learning needs of all. Rather, an array of program options must be developed, including provisions in regular classrooms, special classes, and special schools (Parke 1989). And these program options must be thoroughly evaluated.

The Agenda Ahead
The first steps in our agenda are clear. We must begin to use identification procedures that guarantee access to all, to train teachers to look for—and enhance—the abilities of all students, and to provide more rigorous and broadly based programs. By taking these steps, we can be assured that the educational opportunities presented to our gifted and talented students will more fully prepare them for their futures.

References

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