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The grass isn't always greener: A comparison of programs for the gifted and talented

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The grass isn't always greener: A comparison of programs for the gifted and talented

Abstract

It seems to be a generally accepted premise that in education an extra effort is needed when teaching exceptional children. In the case of Public Law 94-142, it is federal law that equality of educational opportunity shall be provided in education. As a rule, students on one end of the spectrum 1 (students with learning disabilities, mental retardation, or emotional disturbance) have well defined services, well qualified personnel and these personnel practice well-delineated procedures. If we govern our behavior within the context of the principles of Fairness and Balance, then it would be good to provide an equality of services for exceptional students at the opposite end of the spectrum: the "gifted" or "talented" student. Thus it would be best and is most just, to provide an equality of services, personnel and procedures for all exceptional students. In addition, the "gifted and talented" student represents a resource which would best be tapped, and not ignored or tolerated by society. While this is true of all students, it is especially true of the "gifted" student.

The Grass Isn't
Always Greener:
A Comparison of Programs
for the
Gifted and Talented

A Graduate Project
Submitted to the
Department of Curriculum and Instruction
In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts in Education

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Chapter I

It seems to be a generally accepted premise that in education an extra effort is needed when teaching exceptional children. In the case of Public Law 94-142, it is federal law that equality of educational opportunity shall be provided in education. As a rule, students on one end of the spectrum (students with learning disabilities, mental retardation, or emotional disturbance) have well defined services, well qualified personnel and these personnel practice well-delineated procedures. If we govern our behavior within the context of the principles of Fairness and Balance, then it would be good to provide an equality of services for exceptional students at the opposite end of the spectrum: the "gifted" or "talented" student. Thus it would be best and is most just, to provide an equality of services, personnel and procedures for all exceptional students. In addition, the "gifted and talented" student represents a resource which would best be tapped, and not ignored or tolerated by society. While this is true of all students, it is especially true of the "gifted" student.

The purpose of this paper is to describe and define the issue of "giftedness" and make suggestions for program development. It will also compare the problems of and procedures for developing programs for gifted and talented students in two uniquely different school systems.

Chapter II

Establishing a Program for Gifted Students: Enhancing Curricular Alternatives

A system of enhanced curricular alternatives instead of a "pull-out" program as the optimal means of meeting individual needs of accelerated students is the idea of Dr. Thomas Gordon in his book Teacher Effectiveness Training, (1972). The concept of enhanced curricular alternatives is also defended by Roger Taylor (1980). Within this section of this chapter, this investigator will describe a plan which would be implemented within the regular school and regular classroom, but could be supplemented by other methods outlined in the section on Specific Curricular and Extra-Curricular Offerings.

There are a number of necessary and sufficient steps which characterize a program of enhanced curricular alternatives for the exceptional and accelerated student.

First, a philosophy of education for the gifted student must be established, within the context of a free and appropriate public education as well as American democratic principles.

Second, alternatives need to be developed which represent an expansion and enhancement of the regular curriculum. Some of the alternatives available are presented in the section on Curricular and Extra-Curricular Alternatives which can be developed by schools.

Third, students who are exceptional and accelerated need to be identified. There are a number of ways this goal can be accomplished. Which specific method is used depends upon the priority of the needs of the accelerated student within the school district and the funds available.

Fourth, alternatives representing an expansion and enhancement of the curriculum for accelerated students need to be implemented.

Fifth, a program of curricular monitoring and evaluation needs must be built in.

The next section of this chapter will deal with some of the issues associated with the identification of accelerated students.

On the Identification of Gifted Students

An expansion and enhancement of the regular curriculum to meet the needs of all students is necessary. Thus, whether or not a student is in the 95th percentile or the 99th percentile is not significant. What is important is the quality and quantity of curricular and extra curricular alternatives available to the student.

It is apparent that traditional measures of identification for accelerated students leave much to be desired. Various studies have shown that teachers are not very effective in recognizing the gifted child. It has been shown that they fail to identify from ten to fifty percent of gifted students. They also select many children (about thirty percent) who are not gifted (Pegnato and Birch, 1959). Since identification of accelerated students is an important element of a program, this issue must be dealt with. Teachers can use the Renzulli-Hartman Scale.

Parents are in a better position to identify accelerated students than teachers. There is a limitation in parent-identification in that parents tend to be overly ego-involved in this issue and, as such, may tend to overemphasize the child's "giftedness" to meet or compensate for their own personal needs. This lack of objectivity does not, however, eliminate them from suggesting that an identification process be started.

Still another method is peer nominations. According to Taylor, (1980) this is the best method available.

The specific process for identification of the gifted student needs to be established by a group representing various levels of education and this identification needs to be confirmed through objective criteria. Curricular or extra-curricular alternatives are then devised which are consistent with the individual student need or ability.

The initial process of identification could begin easily with percentile rankings at a district level (Taylor, 1980) on available achievement tests. Accelerated achievement of any of

the subscales or composite scores could be one of the measures used to assess the level of a student's giftedness.

Once a "paper screen" has taken place, a more intensive and specific examination of individual potential or ability would then be required. This step would include individual or group testing in a number of areas of potential talent. Since this step tends to be a costly and time-consuming process, it would be necessary to have the required district support for an overall program meeting the needs of the gifted student. Individual assessment through private consultants could range from \$50 to \$100 per individual evaluation. If more than one assessment instrument were used costs could go up. If a person considers these factors (testing time, interpretation time, direct costs) then the implication for a school district providing these services are obvious: the program must have a high priority for funding and resources.

Curricular Offerings: A General Focus

There are many ways to enhance the objectives and activities now presented in regular classrooms and schools. Using Renzulli as a model (Hallihan and Kaufman, 1978), there are three basic types of activities which can be provided in the classroom: Type I Activities which are general exploratory activities; Type II Activities which involve group training, and Type III Activities which represent individual and small group investigations of real problems.

Since equality of opportunity does not mean identical services for each child in school a differentiated educational program is desired. Such a program would include:

1. a differentiated curriculum which denotes higher cognitive concepts and processes.
2. instructional strategies which accomodate the learning styles of accelerated students and modify curriculum content.
3. special grouping arrangements which include a variety

of administrative procedures appropriate to particular children, i.e., special classes, honors classes, seminars, resources, exploration classes and activities, and the like.

Following is a list of specific curricular and extra-curricular alternatives which can be expanded or adapted to meet individual student and school needs.

Specific Curricular and Extra-curricular Enhancement Alternatives

1. summer institutes or summer programs
2. nongraded primary schools or pre-primary schools
3. early admission to college
4. college-level courses for high school students
5. college credit for high school courses
6. special classes in a particular subject matter in the student's curriculum
7. special classes in all subject matter in the student's curriculum
8. Saturday seminars
9. ability grouping
10. enrichment in regular classrooms
11. early graduation
12. adding a course to the student's normal course load
13. clubs and extracurricular projects
14. field trips
15. special televised courses
16. half-day regular program, half-day enriched program
17. grade level acceleration
18. special schools
19. enhancement counseling
20. individual tutoring
21. independent study
22. student exchange
23. flexible progression
24. advanced placement
25. honors programs

26. activities offered by nonschool institutions
27. differentiated curriculum
28. mentoring
29. Type III projects
30. peer helping
31. alternate extra-curricular alternatives
32. enriched curricular alternatives (projects or activities)
using higher levels of cognitive functioning as described
by Bloom
33. extended educational development programs
34. instruction by microcomputer
35. student centers
36. extended learnings
37. seminars
38. advocates in the community
39. library or media research centers
40. research field trips
41. teacher helpers or aides
42. community experiences
43. creative-aesthetic experiences
44. cross-age tutoring
45. mini-courses
46. community people in schools
47. team teaching with other teachers of gifted students
48. itinerant gifted teacher or teams
49. career classes
50. shadowing
51. early graduation
52. correspondence study at home
53. parent helpers in classes
54. half-day working
55. mobile units
56. cluster schools feeding a host school
57. consortium of school districts
58. regional programs for accelerated students

Specific Recommendations:

1. Qualified personnel should be trained in identification and program development for gifted students at all levels.

2. Additional staff should be added to accommodate the needs of gifted exceptional children, consistent with the rationale outlined earlier. It is not fair or wise to expect the present staff to accommodate the tremendous additional burden.

It is also important to keep in mind the importance of student-staff ratios. This cannot but help to reduce the effectiveness of instruction and the quality of education. A class ratio of from 15-20 gifted students would seem optimal, if the goal of the school district is an excellent education.

3. Specific in-service, classes, materials and training for regular classroom teachers is recommended. These services and materials should be provided by the district, within the guidelines established by a task force on gifted and talented education. Alternatives could include early-release days, subsidized weekend in-service, and a significant budget for appropriate educational materials.

4. As was indicated in the previous recommendation, college-level classes for teachers and parents on the topic of gifted students is highly desirable. These classes could be initiated and subsidized by the school district.

5. A parent program for accelerated students is recommended. This program should optimally involve all three levels of education (elementary, middle or junior high and high school) and represent a curriculum with a scope and sequence which is K-12.

Chapter III

This chapter will describe and compare the development and implementation of two different programs for the gifted and talented student.

The first is in a small midwestern community located near a large industrial area and a state university. The second is located in an energy boom town in the Overthrust Belt of the Rocky Mountains eighty miles from the nearest metropolitan area.

Although the communities and their resources varied greatly, this chapter will point out how procedures in developing programs for the gifted were quite similar.

Hudson Enrichment Program

Hudson, Iowa is located in the northeast section of the state. It is near Waterloo, a major industrial area, and Cedar Falls, home of the University of Northern Iowa.

Although some of Waterloo's industries do determine part of Hudson Community School District's assessed valuation, Hudson has felt the economic crunch in its existing programs. Hopes for funding new programs have been slim.

In spite of economic conflicts, during the 1979-80 school year interested individuals of the faculty volunteered their time to develop a program for the gifted and talented. The program was named the Hudson Enrichment Program (HEP). The philosophy the committee adopted was in accordance with the educational philosophy of the Hudson Community School. It is as follows:

We believe that each child should be accepted into the educational program as he is. He should be provided with the kind of school environment which will enable him to recognize the rights and responsibilities of living in a democracy and stimulate him to develop his potentialities to the fullest extent possible, and to provide opportunities for the student to grow in his ability to judge critically, to think constructively

and potentialities.

6. To provide learning alternatives which are appropriate to individual growth.
7. To expose the student to wider intellectual horizons.
8. To emphasize individual success and excellence in academic, social and physical realms (Hudson Community Schools, 1979).

Once the philosophy and objectives were completed, identification procedures began. The committee decided to begin with fourth, fifth and sixth grade students. Identification instruments included teacher nominations, all available test scores, and further teacher input. The committee made the final selection using the following cutoffs: 85 on ITBS; 125 on IQ; 115 on CAT; 95 on Stanford and a minimum of three teacher nominations (Hudson, 1980).

By second semester, identification of first, second and third graders was completed. Because there were not many test scores available, Renzulli checklists were used along with teacher nominations. A cutoff score of 2.90 was used to determine placement in the program (Hudson, 1980).

Upon completion of identification, parents were notified and asked to sign a permission slip for inclusion of their child in the program. Seven percent of the elementary population had been identified. Only one parent refused to grant permission. A reason for the refusal was not given.

The committee had decided to initiate a mentor-type pull-out program. Students were interviewed to determine areas of interest for which mentors would be sought.

Once mentors had volunteered in areas related to those students had requested, students signed up for courses. Course offerings included: archeology, astronomy, chemistry, computers, creative dramatics, creative writing, French, German, music, sign language, and Spanish. Mentors from the community, area education agency, nearby university and elementary and secondary

and to express his thoughts clearly. It is therefore necessary to extend the learning experiences to meet the unique needs, abilities and interests of the talented and gifted student (Hudson Community Schools, 1979).

The objectives developed by the committee include:

1. To identify the gifted and talented.
2. To understand the abilities and needs of each individual
3. To provide an educational program that will enable each individual to develop his/her abilities to the fullest.
4. To prepare the students for a responsible and productive role as an adult.
5. To help each child gain a healthy concept of self - his/her strengths, weaknesses, areas of needed improvement

Faculty met with students one hour a week. Methods of instruction varied with each instructor.

A permanent facility was not available the first year of Hudson's program. Most classes were held in the elementary learning center. Chemistry and computer classes had to be scheduled when the facilities in the high school were available. Those students who participated in creative dramatics traveled to the University of Northern Iowa for their class.

HEP was budgeted \$500 for the first year. Materials were kept at a minimum. Most of the budget was used to pay for an aide one half day a week to allow the coordinator time away from her regular duties as elementary librarian to work on the program.

At the end of the year, students, parents, and mentors were asked to complete a questionnaire. The majority of those questioned felt the program was a valuable one and would like to participate again.

The committee reviewed the program and several improvements were made for the second year. Major improvements included an increase in aide time, a permanent facility for classes not

requiring special equipment, payment for mileage for mentors (those other than Hudson faculty or area education agency personnel) and payment to faculty who participated in the program for their planning time.

Additional course offerings the second year included alternative energy, art, chisanbop, dinosaurs, puppetry, and science.

HEP as its name implies, is an enrichment program for students who have been identified as talented and gifted. Luckily, Hudson had a group of interested people who saw to it that such a program was possible in spite of a shortage of financial resources.

Hudson's program has been under constant evaluation and revision since its beginning in 1979. The committee realized this must continue if the program and the efforts they have put into it pay off to their fullest capacity in meeting the needs of gifted and talented students.

Evanston Adjusted Learning Program

Evanston, Wyoming is located in the southwest corner of the state approximately eighty miles from Salt Lake City, Utah, the closest metropolitan area. Until about five years ago, Evanston was a small, stable community. With the discovery of oil and natural gas in the Rocky Mountain Overthrust Belt, Evanston began to grow quite rapidly. Along with this growth in the community came the obvious growth in the school population. A new elementary school has opened every year since the boom began. A new middle school opened in 1982 and is already extremely overcrowded. A desperately needed new high school will open 1985.

The energy boom was not only responsible for the need of these new schools, but was responsible for the construction of them as well. Uinta County School District Number One's assessed valuation was \$13 million in the fall of 1978. By July 1983 that amount had soared to \$450 million.

Along with the sudden rise in school population came the need for expanded special services programs. During the fall of 1980, a committee was appointed by the Director of Special Services, at the request of the Board of Education, to study the issues surrounding programs and services for gifted and talented students and to make recommendations regarding a possible program.

Using the following philosophy as its basis, the committee developed Evanston's Adjusted Learning Program:

The philosophy of Uinta County School District Number One in regards to Talented and Gifted programs is guided by the conviction that every child has the right to the best program of education that can be provided. This educational program must be democratically developed to provide experiences that will allow each individual to develop his talents, skills, and abilities to the fullest.

The curriculum of the district is the true measure of the educational opportunity provided young people. Therefore it is the philosophy of the district to provide educational

experiences within the normal curriculum offerings sufficiently extensive and varied to satisfy the needs of individual students regardless of the range of their abilities or their achievements (Uinta County School District Number One, 1980)

The committee recommended implementation of a pilot program in the fifth grades beginning in the second semester of 1981. The implementation of this program in the fifth grades was in no way intended to detract from the present programming for identified students in other grades. The fifth grade pilot was intended to be an intensified program for the purpose of gathering additional data upon which future program recommendations could be made. Services to students at other grade levels, those previously identified in new referrals, continued to be provided in the regular classroom.

Twenty-four percent of the fifth grade students were referred by their classroom teachers as being potentially eligible for placement in the pilot program in accordance with the standards developed by the committee. Students were rated according to five criteria, each worth up to two points, for a total of ten points. Six points were required for placement in the program. The five areas rated were: test results, teacher recommendations, autobiography, child study team recommendation and principal recommendation. Twelve percent of the fifth grade students were ultimately placed in the pilot program.

The curriculum for this pilot program was divided into five two-week units. The units covered included the following: literature, math/science, social studies, communication skills and social awareness.

Educational services for identified children were provided, primarily in the regular classroom, under the direction of the regular classroom teacher. Additional enrichment activities were provided for a maximum of 120 minutes per week under the direction of the elementary media specialists.

Additional instruction was budgeted and provided for classroom teachers and other interested parties. A full day of consultation was provided to the fifth grade teachers within the first two weeks of the program at a cost of \$200. A full day inservice program was provided for all interested District personnel at a cost of \$300. A budget of \$500 was set aside to purchase supplementary supplies and materials to support the program.

Finally, \$500 was budgeted to conduct an evaluation of the pilot program. The purpose of the evaluation was to determine the effectiveness and efficiency of the program and to develop recommendations regarding its expansion. Parents, teachers and students were surveyed at the end of the second semester. Students and parents shared their enthusiasm about the program and hoped to see it expanded. Teachers felt more inservice training and specialized instruction and coordination were needed. They also felt many other students could have benefited from the program and did not appreciate the amount of time they had to spend away from their regular classes.

It had been the hopes of the committee that from the evaluations and the program itself would come an overall focus on middle school programming, with a primary focus on sixth grade.

However, during the summer of 1981, a new administration came on board in Evanston. The new superintendent's philosophy included two critical points that greatly affected the suggestions of teachers involved in the pilot program. This philosophy included the following:

1. Children will not be removed from the classroom for a special program. All necessary special instruction and enrichment activities will take place in the context of the regular classroom.
2. District in-service training will not be provided for all teachers as required in-service will be after hours and voluntary (Uinta County School District Number One, 1982).

Ultimately, the Director of Special Services was directed by the Superintendent to stamp all materials related to the program as "Strictly Confidential" and file them.

By the end of the 1981-82 school year, a group of concerned parents had approached the school board about the lack of a gifted and talented program. Many of these people were the parents of students who had participated in the pilot program a year before. They presented a proposal to the school board specifically requesting:

1. an orderly planning process involving parents, teachers and administrators.
2. a plan with all elements, time lines, and roles identified.
3. a budget to support the program (Evanston Parents, 1982).

The Board responded to the parent group informing them that a curriculum coordinator had been hired for the following school year (1982-83). Among this coordinator's duties would be the task of looking at possibilities for a program for the gifted and talented.

It was not until the fall of 1983 when yet another superintendent was hired that the curriculum coordinator organized a task force of teachers, parents, and administrators.

It has been the task of this committee to review the work done by the original committee, make new recommendations, and hopefully, get a program for the gifted and talented off the ground in Evanston, Wyoming.

Chapter IV

It has been the purpose of this paper to outline alternative approaches to gifted and talented education. These approaches represent an extension and development of regular curricular offerings with the purpose of meeting the individual needs of accelerated exceptional children.

Curricular offerings of an alternate nature were described in both a general and specific context. A long list of both curricular and extra-curricular offerings was presented. This list is good, but not exhaustive, and may serve to suggest other options. Recommendations for implementing a program for the gifted was made.

It was suggested that there is a need for additional personnel to become actively involved in the process of identification of gifted students and delivery of services to that group.

Finally, it has described and compared programs from two uniquely different backgrounds. However, procedures in developing programs for the gifted and talented in Hudson, Iowa and Evanston, Wyoming are not unique.

These two districts do not share the same financial resources. This is not the issue. Lack of interest is not a problem for either district.

It is the opinion of this investigator that advantage must be taken of all possible resources. If money is not available, as was the case in Hudson, measures must be taken to provide a program without it (or with very little of it). Money must not be thrown into a program without a definite plan either. Members of Evanston's task force were careful to see that did not happen.

Time is a resource that must not be overlooked. It takes time to develop programs. It takes time for those involved to adjust to new programs. Time is needed to train teachers and educate other involved individuals. Time is needed for due consideration of the program that has been developed and it must not be viewed as stalling or avoiding the issues.

Programs for the gifted and talented are programs for potential leaders of the future. If all possible resources are

used to their fullest advantage in developing these programs, students involved in them will have the opportunity to develop their own resources to their fullest potential.

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