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Kathleen Jo Croell
University of Northern Iowa

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Evaluating school programs for the talented and gifted

Abstract

Evaluating educational programs is always a challenge and when it is a nonstandardized program such as talented and gifted programs the challenge is intensified. These programs do not usually follow a typical classroom structure therefore requiring a customized evaluation. 1 Traditionally an evaluator would study the programs' goals and objectives to see if these have been attained. As Morris and Taylor Fitz-Gibbon (1978) point out a program should start with a list of goals that explains without ambiguity what the planners of the program agree it should accomplish. Tuckman (1979) encourages the evaluator to have the checklist stated in behavioral forms for specified thinking and comprehension outcomes, for attitude and value outcomes, and any other specified learning related behavior. The appearance of the behavior would lead the evaluator to suspect that this behavior is stemming from a secure base of knowledge or attitude -- a goal of the program being reflected in the behavior.

EVALUATING SCHOOL PROGRAMS FOR THE TALENTED AND GIFTED

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Norman McCumsey

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Date Approved

Adviser/Director of Research Paper

Robert H. Decker

6-30-89
Date Approved

Second Reader of Research Paper

Dale R. Jackson

6-30-89
Date Received

Head, Department of Educational
Administration and Counseling

Evaluating School Programs for the Talented and Gifted

Evaluating educational programs is always a challenge and when it is a nonstandardized program such as talented and gifted programs the challenge is intensified. These programs do not usually follow a typical classroom structure therefore requiring a customized evaluation.

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Renzulli in his Guidebook for Evaluating Programs for the Gifted and Talented (1975) would agree that measuring the attainment of the objectives is the most important goal of evaluation, but he warns that the evaluator must be free to investigate all conditions that may influence the effective operation of the program. "If told where to look and what to look at the evaluator may overlook important factors contributing to the success or failure of particular aspects of a program."

Special Problems Evaluating TAG Programs

Renzulli (1975) explains that TAG programs often stress higher level thinking skills which cannot be measured as easily and precisely as "knowledge". Even when trying to measure knowledge growth of these students, standardized tests are not very revealing. These tests are not reliable at showing growth in the upper ninety percent, where many TAG students score.

Renzulli (1975) finds the behavioral objectives approach inappropriate for TAG programs. "By putting pressure on a person to formulate his goals, to keep to them, and to express them in testable terms may enormously alter his product in ways that are not always desirable."

Summing up these problems Renzulli (1975) states, "There is no easy way to resolve the dilemma that often exists between the evaluator's need to be rigorous and scientific and the program developer's desire to be innovative and flexible in programming for TAG students."

Important Sources to Consult in the Evaluation

To help overcome some of the special problems of evaluating TAG programs it will help if the administrator is aware of traits of gifted and talented students, and aware of community values and goals and their willingness to support special programs. This person needs to be aware of the TAG curriculum and its ability to meet the needs of the gifted in that school, and how local resources can help meet

these needs (Booth and Brown, 1985).

In his book Evaluating Instructional Programs, Tuckman (1979) stresses maximizing the involvement throughout of administrators, board members, teachers, students, and parents. "Wide involvement creates interest and concern and brings obstructions to change out into the open before change would need to occur."

Tuckman (1979) feels that teachers as a group are most critical to the success of an evaluation. Teachers should be involved in the design of the evaluation instrument. Being receptive to comments and suggestions, and being willing to incorporate any that may be suitable into the evaluation plan will help create an atmosphere of cooperation and sincere interest in the constructive evaluation of the program. When the evaluation is finished present the results and recommendations to the teachers.

Considerations When Developing an Evaluation

Summative evaluation is used to judge overall impact of the program and the effectiveness of the entire program. The evaluator describes the program; produces statements concerning the program's achievement of announced goals; notes unanticipated outcomes; and when possible makes comparisons with alternative programs (Morris & Taylor Fitz-Gibbon, 1978).

Joyce Van Tassel (Grossi & Jordan, 1980) urges at least an annual assessment of the TAG program to ascertain whether or not student needs and program needs

are being met. In this evaluation two questions should be addressed: Are all needs of the TAG students being considered when planning the program? Is program input being solicited from adequate numbers of people and publics?

In the summative evaluation the evaluator should also consider that revisions in the TAG program may be necessary as school population and climate change. Another factor that may affect the evaluator's suggestions for the future curriculum and philosophy of the program is new research findings relating to gifted education (Booth & Brown, 1986).

Renzulli (1975) feels that the program being evaluated will determine the evaluation design and instruments to be used. "It is the evaluator's responsibility to respect the integrity of the program when he is planning evaluation activities. The evaluator's main concern: How effectively is a program serving students?"

No single evaluation model will serve all the evaluation needs of a given program. Model evaluations could be used when developing the individualized evaluation instrument for a particular program, including: Stake's Model, Eash's Differential Evaluation, and Provais' Discrepancy Model (Renzulli, 1975).

Van Tassel (Grossi & Jordan, 1980) thinks an evaluation design should include performance objectives such as: expected outcomes for students, parents, administrators and staff stated in terms of the individual who will be exhibiting the behavior; the behavior itself; and the objective of the behavior. The students, parents, administrators, and staff should also be surveyed as part of the evaluation. She also recommends using some type of testing measurement instrument, and to state levels that need to be reached to indicate success.

Renzulli's (1975) five points for evaluation design provide some other considerations:

1. Discover whether and how effectively the objectives of a program are being fulfilled.
2. Discover unplanned and unexpected consequences that are resulting from program practices.
3. Determine underlying policies and related activities that contribute to success or failure in particular areas.
4. Provide continuous in process feedback at intermediate stages throughout the course of a program.
5. Suggest realistic as well as ideal alternative courses of action for program modification.

Susanne Richert (1978) suggests asking these questions in a summative evaluation: a) Have pupils improved knowledge and ability to acquire knowledge? b) Have the quality of their thinking and reasoning ability improved? c) Have they developed leadership? d) How has the school affected their interpersonal relationships and attitudes? e) Has the program had an effect on their desire to learn? f) Have they developed self understanding?

Richert (1978) feels that one of the goals for the program should be to acquire intellectual skill. This would be evaluated by measuring pupils' ability to analyze and define problems and find alternate solutions. Another goal she suggests is that the learner will gain self understanding, measured by pre and post pupil self evaluation of goals, aspirations and self concept. Each student should have the right

to set their own learning objective and become proficient at self evaluation. The students should be allowed to make decisions and become aware of their own unique roles in the educational process.

Evaluating Attitude

Goals dealing with attitude are often included in TAG programs. Some ways to evaluate attitude that could be incorporated into the design instrument are discussed by Henderson, Morris, and Taylor Fitz-Gibbon (1978). They suggest seeking attitudes by asking the person directly for their opinion; asking others about the attitudes of the group being evaluated; asking members of the group about their attitude toward each other; or using records such as counselor's file, or attendance records.

Tests that measure attitudes toward self are available (Henderson, Morris, Taylor Fitz-Gibbon, 1978) including: Piers-Harris Children's Self Concept Scale; Self Esteem Inventory (Coopersmith); Intellectual Achievement Responsibility Questionnaire (Crandall); and the School Morale Scale and Student Attitude Survey.

In How to Measure Attitudes Henderson, Morris, and Taylor Fitz-Gibbon (1978) comment that they suspect a relationship between attitude and cognitive achievement. They think some interviews should be used to get at attitudes, but feel more can be learned from open ended questions on a questionnaire because it permits ventilation of feelings, may produce responses that point out a situation or outcome that was unanticipated, and because it does not limit range of response.

Areas of Concern to Be Included in TAG Evaluation

Inservice

Look at the effectiveness of inservice programs and at progress and sequential development achieved by participants. Studies show (Grossi & Jordan, 1980) that 10-50% of gifted students fail to be identified by teachers. If given guidance in observation, teachers can provide much significant information. Their observations supply the greatest resource in identifying gifted students next to objective tests.

Identification

Check to see if only "good" students are included in the TAG program (Freeman & Sears, 1986). The gifted underachiever often hides under a cloak of misbehavior and is easily overlooked as a gifted student. Marie Gustin (Grossi & Jordan, 1980) states, "The gifted underachiever is a kind of intellectual delinquent who withdraws from goals, activities, and active social participation in general. Initial attempts at creative accomplishments may not have been seen by others as worthwhile, but only as 'queer' or 'different'. It is believed that blocking rewards for deviant achievement has blunted work drives and stifled creativity. Cultural differences in values and poor parental relationships may also contribute to the failure to achieve."

Early identification is important if students are to benefit from special education. Early identification improves chances for proper challenge and channeling. Evaluation of potential and observation of behavior and achievement should

continue throughout school life. Teachers need to be able to identify gifted and free them to grow and develop more fully (Grossi & Jordan, 1980).

A specific identification policy should be in place allowing several areas (standardized tests, creativeness, observed advanced thinking ability, etc.) and several opinions (teachers', peers', parents') to be considered in determining who will be enrolled in the TAG program. Very definite criteria for admittance into the program are considered important for the administrative effectiveness of the TAG program.

Thais Johnson (1986) suggests that these questions be addressed when evaluating student selection: a) How are auditions organized? b) How are appeals of decisions to be handled? c) Are probationary placements permitted?

Mary Frasier (Grossi & Jordan, 1980) says, "Identification should occur as early as possible, should be continuous, should use multiple criteria, and should involve a variety of professionals." She feels that screening should allow each child to be considered, yet it should limit the number who need to be evaluated. The data collected in the evaluation should be used in planning the educational program for the gifted student.

Frasier (Grossi & Jordan, 1980) recommends using a committee chaired by the TAG teacher that includes the counselor, principal, and teachers to decide the definition of gifted, the grades that will be included in the TAG program, the number of students to be in the program, which students will participate, and assessment tools to be used.

Curriculum Design

The evaluator must determine if instruction is adequate to meet the level of intelligence of the gifted students. The program is not working if kids are dropping out because the curriculum doesn't meet their needs or because it's too demanding so there is not enough time for regular classwork (Freeman & Sears, 1986).

The curriculum should address these four issues according to Byron Barrington (1986):

1. Inadequate challenge, repetition, and boredom of highly able students in regular classrooms. (The top five to ten percent in most classes are unchallenged unless ability grouped.)
2. Insufficient opportunity to have social interaction with age mates with similar abilities and interests.
3. Lack of continuity (K-12) in TAG program.
4. Inadequate information given to gifted regarding their abilities combined with inadequate recognition for their accomplishments.

Barrington (1986) feels that there should be a curriculum approach committee including the TAG coordinator and curricular area teachers from K-12. They should identify kids with particular curriculum needs and suggest alternatives such as subject acceleration, ability grouping, clustering by subject area, or cross grade grouping. The committee should monitor and evaluate the progress of the students they've recommended for particular curriculum alternatives. This approach will especially benefit students who show giftedness in one particular area, but do not show up in the overall gifted identification.

"Curriculum for TAG students should not be a predetermined route which all must follow. The curriculum is a framework for individual learning alternatives, flexible enough to meet the needs of students and teachers. It needs to fit the learning models of the students," states John Grossi (1980).

The curriculum must be more than just additive, it has to be redesigned to make provisions for students' learning different content at varying rates with alternative learning styles. When students are aware of their own learning styles, they will become more task and product-oriented and will enjoy school (Geogiades & Monaco, 1986).

Teaching Strategies

"Effective instruction for gifted students differs from regular classroom instruction; hence the evaluator must look for these differences"(Booth & Brown, 1985). Note the pace of instruction, its usually quicker than in a regular classroom. The sequence of instruction may be different because gifted students reach the conceptual level sooner and need less review and practice. The evaluator will need to do task analysis and question analysis in order to determine if the instruction level is appropriate for the students.

The instructor needs to be flexible; spark students' minds; and listen to students' theories. The instructor should be keeping close contact with parents via newsletters, informative programs (these should include educating parents about characteristics of gifted children), and open house (Freeman & Sears, 1986).

Thais Johnson (1986) feels the teacher evaluation needs to be tailored to the uniqueness of each teacher. To do this, selected teacher competencies become the target of evaluation. These competencies are created from the teacher's responsibilities. The teaching activities must be an accurate reflection of the stated objectives. The way time is used reveals priorities. Check to see if stated priority of objectives matches how time is being used in the classroom. For this evaluation elicit information from several different appropriate sources. Johnson feels, "This evaluation provides respect and growth for the teacher."

Administrative Effectiveness

"The administrator serves as the motivator of people (staff, community, and students) and the promoter of a practical, flexible and meaningful program," proclaims Marie Gustin (Jordan & Gossi, 1980). The administrator should provide staff training for curriculum development and new trends in gifted education. This person should oversee that newsletters, press releases, and parent meetings are being provided.

A key responsibility for the administrator is to be aware of the traits of gifted students; aware of community values and goals for the gifted; and aware of the local curriculum and its ability to meet the needs of the gifted (Booth & Brown, 1985). "Ongoing assessment from knowledgeable experts is perceived as constructive and supportive by students." (Geogiades & Monaco, 1986).

Presenting Results of the Evaluation

Bruce Tuckman (1979) recommends pulling the evaluation together with a summary, conclusions and recommendations.

1. **Summary:** Begin with a numbered summary of the findings from ten to twelve statements.

2. **Conclusions:** Next list five or six conclusions that synthesize the findings into more easily assimilated and applied statements. Underline each conclusion to make it stand out. Each conclusion should be followed by a brief paragraph of explanation and support.

3. **Recommendations:** Finally offer five to ten action oriented recommendations, each underlined, followed by a paragraph of elaboration. Make sure they are based on findings and conclusions of the evaluation. Preparing recommendations is one of the more creative aspects of evaluation. Recommendations must be defensible: in terms of evaluation results. They must also be politically sensitive in that they fit into the district context such as cost of implementing these recommendations. Finally they should be guidelines for action. Conclusions are passive, recommendations are active, this is the evaluator's opportunity to effect change.

Include plans to use the evaluation results for district planning and resource allocation. The results should also be used to plan future teacher inservice training programs in order to improve the implementation of these results where applicable (Tuckman, 1979).

Present the results to administrators, school board, teachers, parents, and public. The recommendations are more likely to be carried out if they are clearly communicated, using charts and overhead transparencies may help achieve this goal. Answer questions clearly and avoid becoming defensive if your results are challenged (Tuckman, 1979).

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