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A review of the issue of elitism as a perceived negative characteristic of gifted programs

Scott A. Jones
University of Northern Iowa

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A review of the issue of elitism as a perceived negative characteristic of gifted programs

Abstract

At some point in time almost every teacher who works with gifted children will have to deal with the issue of elitism in the programming strategies established for these children. In fact, according to Borland (1989), teachers and coordinators of gifted education programs are frequently charged with fostering elitism in the schools. He further states that, "For some people, the phrase 'program for the gifted' reflexively connotes unfair advantage and a retreat from egalitarianism" (p.83). Gardner and Hofstadter (1989) also address this problem when they say: "The linking of excellence and elitism is an ingrained national tendency, an enduring facet of our national character, and it is something of which educators working with gifted students should be aware" (p. 83).

A Review of the Issue of Elitism as a Perceived
Negative Characteristic of Gifted Programs

A Graduate Project Submitted
to the Department of Curriculum and Instruction
In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree Masters of Arts in Education
UNIVERSITY OF NORTHERN IOWA

by

Scott A. Jones

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Education.

July 24, 1992

Date Approved

William Waack

Director of Research Paper

July 24, 1992

Date Approved

William Waack

Graduate Faculty Adviser

July 24, 1992

Date Approved

Marvin Heller

Graduate Faculty Reader

July 24, 1992

Date Approved

Peggy Ishler

101

Head, Department of Curriculum
and Instruction

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A Review of the Issue of Elitism as a Perceived
Negative Characteristic of Gifted Programs

Introduction to the Problem

At some point in time almost every teacher who works with gifted children will have to deal with the issue of elitism in the programming strategies established for these children. In fact, according to Borland (1989), teachers and coordinators of gifted education programs are frequently charged with fostering elitism in the schools. He further states that, "For some people, the phrase 'program for the gifted' reflexively connotes unfair advantage and a retreat from egalitarianism" (p.83). Gardner and Hofstadter (1989) also address this problem when they say: "The linking of excellence and elitism is an ingrained national tendency, an enduring facet of our national character, and it is something of which educators working with gifted students should be aware" (p. 83).

The concern about the issue of elitism in gifted programming can be very destructive to

gifted education advocacy. According to Fetterman (1988), "The belief that gifted education serves the privileged...remains a powerful force undermining gifted programs today" (p. 9). It appears, then, that as long as there is the misconception that gifted education is unfair or elitist, there will be expressed public concerns about the need or values of gifted programming. James Gallagher (1985) made this point clear when he said:

The culture and community will support the kinds of activities that they find necessary, valuable, and/or enjoyable. If they feel that a program is sufficiently necessary or enjoyable, all sorts of objections are put aside as being relatively inconsequential. If, on the other hand, the community is not interested or involved in supporting such a program, all kinds of objections can be raised as to why these things should not be done or cannot be done. (p. 95)

In the United States, a number of social, educational, and political constituents seem to demonstrate a belief that helping the talented and gifted is unfair or elitist. They support this belief by the argument that programming for the gifted is serving the already privileged and that gifted students can make it on their own. A number of scholars in the field of gifted education have attempted to explain the cause for this belief. For example, Feldhusen (1989) points out that, in our egalitarian society, there is suspicion of those who are markedly different or superior and that we are sometimes extremely intolerant of those who are very different. Colangelo (1989) makes reference to the fact that "gifted education triggers emotional reactions in ways typically not witnessed in other aspects of education. People either enthusiastically defend or attack gifted education, often without any or only minimal factual information" (p. 4).

From the viewpoints thus far presented, it becomes apparent that more focus should be placed on answering the charges of elitism as it is

assumed to exist in current gifted education programs:

If many people view programs for gifted students as elitist enterprises, it is important to know that this is the case. Their perception can be the foundation for powerful and well-intentioned opposition to the program. It is crucial that fears of elitism be laid to rest as soon as possible; otherwise one must contend with people who oppose the program on moral grounds.

(Borland, 1989, p. 83)

It is interesting to note that emphasis on gifted education programs seem to move in cycles according to the particular needs of each historical time period. Borland (1989) stated that "Historically, the most progressive decades of our recent history, the 1930's and the 1960's, have been the decades that witnessed the greatest neglect of, even hostility to, programs for the gifted, while such programs have thrived in the mean-spirited 1980's" (p. 225). In addition, the

history of gifted education indicates that the focus of each individual cycle seems to swing between the goals of excellence and equity in education (Gallagher, Weiss, Oglesby, & Thomas, 1982).

When excellence is of high priority to society, programs for the gifted and talented receive attention and are promoted. Two such examples are (1) the National Defense Education Act of 1958 which is directly attributed to the launching of Sputnik and (2) the numerous educational reforms proposed by the A Nation at Risk report of 1983. When equity is the primary concern, then educational programs for the gifted are ignored. The cyclical movement from excellence to equity and the resultant cyclical concerns with the issue of elitism in programs for the gifted led to the initial conception of this literature review.

Statement of the Purpose

The purpose of this paper was to review the current literature related to the issue of elitism

as a perceived negative characteristic of gifted programs. The review addressed two questions: (1) What are the bases for the arguments of the existence of elitism in gifted programming? and (2) How are the arguments of elitism being defended by educators of the gifted? In seeking the answers to these questions, the writer focused on four issues: (1) the program issue, (2) the child issue, (3) the label issue, and (4) the political issue as they related to the charges of elitism in programming for the gifted.

Definitions

There exist many definitions of giftedness. For the purposes of this paper, Sydney Marland's (1972) definition of giftedness will be used as the operational definition because it takes into account all the dimensions of giftedness:

Gifted and talented children are those identified by professionally qualified persons who by virtue of outstanding abilities are capable of high performance.

These are children who require differentiated

educational programs and services beyond those normally provided by the regular school program in order to realize their contribution to self and society. (1972, p. 69)

The review of the literature revealed no appropriate operational definition of the term elitism. Friedman (1986) stated that the definition of elitism is almost always defined in the perspective of the American democratic tradition. Colangelo (1987) described it as "essentially the belief that one person or group is inherently better or of more value than others" (pgs. 5-6). For the purpose of this paper, however, the term elitism will refer to a narrow and powerful clique in which membership is exclusive and deemed undemocratic because of the privileges and/or opportunities that are provided through participation to some, but are not to others who are equally deserving.

Limitations of the Study

This study limits the review of the literature documents published from 1961 to 1992. The information used in this study was obtained through CD-ROM, UNISTAR and ERIC computer searches of periodicals, books and dissertation abstracts addressing the issue of elitism, excellence, and democracy in the programming for the gifted. The search revealed a number of resources focusing on the issue of elitism in gifted programs. A number of scholars in the field of gifted education allude to the concerns of elitism in gifted programs, but few offer any in-depth discussion related to answering this problem.

The Issues of Elitism in Gifted Education Programs: Arguments and Answers.

Proponents of gifted education have realized that if such programs are to survive, they must meet the needs of the gifted children by advocating and providing defensible educational programs. In order to develop support for such programs, they should not be perceived as elitist

in any form. It is crucial, therefore, that educators of the gifted are willing to communicate their awareness of the charges of elitism in the programming for the gifted and to be able to address these concerns accurately and analytically.

The arguments supporting the existence of elitism in gifted programming are many and varied, and educators of the gifted need to anticipate as many of them as possible. It is also important that they be able to understand the bases for those arguments, as well be able to provide reasonable arguments countering the charges. As Borland (1989) states:

No matter how strong the mandate for starting a program for the gifted might be, no matter how unanimous the board of education or how enthusiastic the administration, there will always be naysayers...bitterly opposed to programs of this sort. (p. 69)

In relationship to the perceived existence of elitism in the field of gifted education Clasen

(1981) identified four issues which need to be examined: (1) the program issue, (2) the child issue, (3) the label issue, and (4) the political issue (p. i). Each of these identified issues will now be clarified and discussed from the viewpoint of (1) the bases for the arguments that elitism is extant and (2) how these arguments are being answered by current scholars in the field of gifted education.

The Program Issue: Bases for Criticism

The program issue asks the question: Is gifted programming elitist? It is concerned with the appropriateness of offering qualitatively different educational programs and/or services for students who are identified as gifted. Therefore it follows that curriculum should be modified in quality, creating an appropriate learning environment for the population of students it is intended to serve. Most of the arguments of elitism directed at gifted programs are based on this issue.

The basic contention that gifted children and youth require and deserve differential programs has led to charges of elitism in gifted programming. When discussing the rationale for gifted programs, the following question invariably arises: Aren't all children gifted? Fetterman (1988) found that many parents, teachers, and administrators hold the belief that gifted children are given special privileges through the participation in gifted programs. It has been argued that gifted students do not need special programs because they will make it on their own. McLeod (1989) found that many argue against special programs for the gifted because they feel gifted programs provide help where none is needed. Sapon-Shevin (1987) addressed the charges of elitism directed at gifted programs and made the following statement: "Arguing that gifted students need something special and having that something special be a high quality program at a time when other children's programs are of minimal quality make the charges of elitism leveled at gifted programs seem reasonable" (p. 48).

Gifted education programs also are charged with being elitist because of unfair identification procedures. Identification remains a relatively inexact science. Richert (1982) concluded that the "state of art of identification of gifted and talented youth is in some disarray" (pg. 39). Borland (1989) made the charge that programs for the gifted do not fairly represent or serve our country's pluralistic society.

Program Issue: Responses to Criticisms

As stated in the previous section, the bases for determining the authenticity of the charge of elitism in gifted programming necessitates a further examination of the (1) the perceived lack of actual need for gifted programs and (2) upon unfair identification procedures. One common theme in the argument that elitism exists seems to be centered on the notion of equality. The notion of equality can be used as a measuring device to determine the appropriateness of gifted programs. In order to understand better the concept of equality as it relates to the arguments of elitism

in gifted programming, it is helpful to look at three ways equality can be interpreted: (1) equal treatment, (2) equal outcomes, and (3) equal access (Sapon-Shevin, 1987). Now let us examine how scholars of gifted education answer these criticisms directed toward gifted programs.

Rationale for the Need for Gifted Programs

Sapon-Shevin (1987) defines equal treatment as the belief that all children deserve and should be treated in the same manner. Such a concept of equality is directed at the need and/or appropriateness of special programs for the gifted. Proponents of gifted education argue that equality of educational experiences was never meant to be the same experiences for all children regardless of the variations in interest and abilities (Cheney, 1986). Colangelo (1983) states that there seems to be a strong love/hate relationship between society and our most able students. On the one hand the high-ability students are praised for their accomplishments and abilities, but on the other hand high-ability

students are not given special programming to develop these talents for fear of unequal treatment. Gardner (1961) noted that "We must face the fact that our kind of society does not always find it easy to applaud the superior individual" (p. 73).

Some scholars in gifted education believe that gifted students are not entitled to more resources or better teachers than other students, but they do deserve an educational program that is a good match to their needs and abilities. Tannenbaum (1983) made the point that "It is the absence, not the presence, of special programs for the gifted that constitutes an injustice" (p. 465). Few educators would advocate equal treatment of all students regardless of their special needs or abilities. The insistence of equal treatment through the "academic lock step approach in which all children are advanced through grade levels regardless of their performance or needs is inappropriate for most gifted youngsters" (McLeod, 1989). Borland (1989) argued that this type of logic can be interpreted

as an argument for punishing gifted children in the name of equality.

The Ruckerfeller Report (1972) came to the conclusion that "by insisting that equality means an exactly similar exposure to education, regardless of the variation in interests and capacity of the student, we are in fact inflicting a subtle but serious form of inequality upon our young people." Fetterman (1988) made the argument perfectly clear when he stated that it should be understood that gifted programs are merely educational programs that meet the needs of a special identified population. The California State Department (1979) also addressed this problem when it stated that although society generally recognizes the need of students who are physically or mentally handicapped and is therefore willing to make special education provisions for them, the needs of students who deviate upward from the mean have been generally untended.

Thus, the issue is not whether gifted students need differentiated programs or services,

but whether all students, including the gifted, should receive a quality educational program in the least restrictive environment that meets their individual needs. Cruickshank (1986) came to the conclusion that special support for the gifted is a necessary element in any society which accepts its responsibility to provide educational experiences consistent with the abilities, motives and interests of all children. He goes on to say that the gifted deserve an appropriate education that matches their individual needs and they should be supported in developing their abilities to their fullest. In simple terms this means that gifted students should not be punished for being different.

McLeod (1989) made one of the strongest statements in support of special programs for the gifted when he addressed the issue of equal educational opportunity. He said:

If one accepts it is the duty of society, through the public school system, to provide educational opportunity for all children appropriate to their individual abilities and

aptitudes, and if one further accepts that some children are exceptional...then the issue is settled. (p. 4)

In addition to the concept of equal treatment, there is also the concept of equal outcomes to support the need for gifted programs. Sapon-Shevin (1987) defined equal outcomes as the assurance that all students reach the same goal: A quality education that meets students' individual needs. The literature review showed that some people believe that the gifted child has an inherent advantage and that he/she does not need any special attention. For example, Fetterman (1988) found that it was the "belief of parents, teachers, administrators, local policymakers, and state legislators that gifted children are given special privileges rather than participating in educational programs that answered their special needs" (p. 9). Equal educational outcomes is the right of all children, he argued, but unfortunately, "the development of gifted programs lags behind that of all other comparable educational programs, including

vocational, handicapped, and migrant education programs" (pg. 3).

Lemov (1979) has estimated that thirty percent of all school dropouts are gifted and talented students. Two major reports that made reference to the dangers of not attending to the unique needs of the gifted are (1) The U.S. Commissioner of Education's Report, and (2) The A Nation at Risk report. The U.S. Commissioner of Education's Report (1971) stated that research has confirmed that many of the talented children perform far below their intellectual potential and that intellectual and creative talent cannot survive educational neglect and apathy. The Nation at Risk report (1983) found that fifty percent of gifted children do not achieve in accord with their abilities. Furthermore, ten to thirty percent of high school drop-outs are in the gifted range of ability. One of the predominant reasons for offering special programs for the gifted is to meet the diverse needs and abilities which are not being met by the regular curriculum.

Response to the Identification Concerns

The final element of equality to answer the concerns of elitism in gifted programs is the concept of equal access: the ability of any person to be able to experience equal opportunities (Sapon-Shevin 1987). From previous statements it is clear that many critics feel that special programs for the gifted do not fairly represent our pluralistic society (Borland, 1989). The basis for this criticism is the process by which students are identified to participate in gifted programs. Therefore, it is from the point of view of identification concerns that equal access, the third element of equality, will be discussed.

Historically, identification for entrance into gifted programs was based on IQ measures alone (Colangelo, 1984). He further states that the early studies of Terman and the frequent over-generalization of the character of giftedness have misled many individuals to believe that giftedness and I.Q. are positively correlated. According to the literature, this unidimensional

association has led, in fact, to many accusations of elitism. This type of measurement limited the access of members of ethnic, minority, and disadvantaged children identified for participation in gifted programs because each child's score was influenced by factors such as socioeconomic background, cultural background, and previous educational experience (Richert, 1982).

Scholars in the field of gifted education indicate that those in charge of identification procedures for gifted programs need to understand that gifted children exist in every segment of our society. Borland (1989) points out that placement committees must make it their goal to find those children, not necessarily on the basis of strict numerical quotas, but in such a way that reasonable people will not draw the conclusion that a pattern of systematic discrimination exists.

Students should be identified and placed in gifted programs through the use of multiple measures that identify the specific aptitudes the program is addressing (Feldhusen, 1989).

According to Richert (1985), six principles should be considered during the identification process:

(1) Advocacy: the procedure should be designed in the best interest of all students, (2)

Defensibility: the procedure should be based on research and recommendations, (3) Equity: the

procedure should guarantee that no one is

overlooked or biased against, (4) Pluralism: the broadest definition of giftedness should be used,

(5) Comprehensiveness: a broad range of giftedness should be identified, and (6)

Pragmatism: the procedure should allow for the modifications of evaluation tools and resources.

From the literature it is evident that good identification procedures, like the ones listed above, be used to yield information about students that (1) is accountable, (2) is inclusive and (3) can guide program development.

The Child Issue: Bases for Criticism

The child issue asks the question: Does gifted programming develop elitist attitudes on the part of the child? It is a common fear that

special programming for the gifted will lead to feelings of superiority on behalf of the identified child (Borland, 1989). It also has been argued that it is elitist to provide programs for the gifted on the grounds that special programming for the gifted create a new elite group. As Parrish (1965) noted, numerous critics fear that special attention given to the education for the gifted will create an elite. They contend that schools should minimize differences among pupils since accenting differences heightens the danger of creating an elite.

The Child Issue: Response to Criticisms

The literature revealed limited information concerning the implementation of special programs for gifted children and youth and how these programs affect their attitudes. However, a few gifted education scholars have researched the effect gifted programs have on children's attitudes. For example, Newland (1976) states that there is not one shred of evidence that suggests that intellectual differences create

elitist attitudes among those identified as being gifted. This is reinforced by conclusions made by Silverman (1992) who points out that when the gifted are grouped homogeneously, they do not come to the conclusion that they are better than everyone else. Rather, they are humbled by finding peers who know more than they do.

Thus, according to some researchers it is unrealistic to expect gifted students to hide and not make use of their abilities because it might make someone feel they are inferior. Clasen (1981) makes a strong argument against the belief that gifted programs create feelings of superiority in identified youth. He said:

If we do not program for the gifted because we are afraid of the possibility that they may develop feelings of superiority, we are saying two things: 1) that it's all right for teachers to allow students to underachieve, and 2) that we believe it is not possible to help gifted students distinguish between a healthy self-concept and negative feelings of superiority. (p.ii)

The Label Issue: Bases for Criticism

The label issue asks the question: Does the label gifted create elitist attitudes? The effect of labeling children as gifted "carries the inference that gifted children are somehow especially privileged or more worthy than other children" (Wolf, 1991, p. 26). The label gifted carries many negative attitudes about the gifted child. Dettmer (1986) conducted an assessment of undergraduate students' attitudes toward special education labels. He found that gifted students were described with phrases such as: "too smart for their own good, disruptive in-class, show-offs, unhappy, conceited, moody, teacher's pets, weird, eccentric, and often depressed" (p. 23).

The Label Issue: Response to Criticisms

It is apparent that in our social climate the term gifted carries many negative connotations. Many scholars in the field of gifted education have made reference to the negative attitudes that are associated with the term. Unfortunately, they

have not yet developed alternative ways to label the educational services offered to this special population so as to not trigger emotional reactions.

Gardner (1984) expressed a concern over the use of labels when he said that "even the most casual glance at our educational system will reveal our great reluctance to put labels on individual differences in general capacity" (p. 79). Colangelo (1989) pointed out that one effect of labeling children as gifted is the triggering emotional reactions in ways not witnessed in other aspects of education. While it is not totally clear why the label gifted promotes such strong negative attitudes, he hypothesized five themes which account for this reactionary behavior.

The first of Colangelo's themes is that the word gifted implies getting something for nothing and most people perceive this as giving privileges to an already privileged group. The second theme is that the label counters the egalitarian belief of society. The third theme is that we as society are hostile to intellectual pursuits, and those

who are seen as intellectually gifted because it threatens the self-esteem of others. The fourth theme is that the gifted population is regarded as a resource to society. In other words, society is more concerned about what they can contribute than they are about the student's needs. The final theme is that gifted education is seen as a luxury, not as something that is vital to the development of this population.

While it is generally acceptable to recognize and separate abilities in areas such as athletics, music, and art, the label gifted taps into our worst fears about elitism (Meyers, 1984). Meyers goes on to say that in order to stay away from the issue of labeling, it is best to label the service rather than the students. Eby (1983) reinforces this concept when she suggests that "educators should replace the notion of the gifted child with the concept of gifted behavior" (p.32). Wolf (1991) suggested the word "underserved" would be a more descriptive label for the identified students, because it puts the right word to the service being provided (pg. 26).

The Political Issue: Bases for Criticism

The political issue asks the question: Is it undemocratic to develop unique programs for the gifted? Those making charges the charges that gifted programs are elitist feel that providing special programming for the gifted population "constitutes the formation of a new meritocracy, but with all of the advantages of sounding egalitarian" (Sapon-Shevin, 1987). According to Fetterman (1988), "the fundamental contradiction in American culture between individualism and conformity provide the cultural backdrop for the political conflict surrounding gifted and talented programs" (p. 10).

Response to the Political Issue

The issue of equality and excellence in education is a very complex problem. In American society both equality and excellence are legitimate educational goals, but they seem to contradict each other. The inherent problems of the two goals was reported by Tannenbaum (1972):

...by leaning too far in the direction of excellence, the country is in danger of creating a special kind of elitism out of meritocracy; by leaning heavily in the direction of equality, it loses sight of real human differences and ignores outstanding potential. There is always the danger that the pursuit of excellence can only be accomplished by a retreat from equality and vice versa. The most serious task facing us today is to place both goals in the same direction so that they can be pursued with equal vigor at the same time. (p. 18)

Some researchers in the field of gifted education feel it is the inaccurate association of intellectual excellence with social inequality that seems to fuel the resistance to special programs for the gifted. "Elitism is, and always has been, rooted in socioeconomic differences, not intellectual differences" (Silverman, 1992, pg. 7).

While some constituencies believe in individuality and in the idea of excellence,

others fear it is elitist to offer special programs to an intellectual group. A report by the Heritage Foundation (1984) implied that it has been our nation's misguided focus on equality that has led to our crisis of excellence. Can we as a nation afford to continue providing the same level of education to all of our students in the name of equality? Silverman (1992) made a strong point in support of the need for special programs for gifted students when she said:

Exploitation of the gifted in order to bring up the lower end of the spectrum may sound fair to some, but bringing the top down does not bring the bottom up, and nothing is gained in the name of democracy by holding back our brightest youngsters. (p. 8)

A democratic society is not one that ignores individual differences and needs, but one that supports them and deals with them wisely. "Equal educational treatment of inherently unequal children is not democratic, it is simply bad

education" (Clasen, 1981, p. iii). Gardner (1984) summed up the argument well when he stated:

The traditional democratic invitation to each individual to achieve the best that is in him requires that we provide each youngster with the particular kind of education which will benefit him...that is the only sense in which equality of opportunity can mean anything...a good society is not one that ignores individual differences but one that deals with them wisely and humanely. (p. 92)

Issues of Elitism in Other Educational Programs

The issue of elitism is often perceived as a problem isolated to gifted education. It may also be wise to note the possible existence of the same arguments of elitism in other school programs. For example, why is the issue of elitism such a concern in programming for the gifted, while it is not considered as an issue in other school programs? Little complaint is heard concerning other education programs that receive

special funding, provide preferential treatment and are very selective as far as who participates in them.

The charge of elitism could easily be directed at school athletic programs, but one can well ask why it is not! Roger Taylor (1980) dramatically demonstrated that athletic programs do foster specific types of elitist behaviors. He went on to point out that all kinds of money and resources can be found for gifted psychomotor programs; but when an intellectual program is proposed, the rules suddenly change.

Gardner (1961) stated that we (society) discriminate between excellence and mediocrity in athletics, but refuse to similarly discriminate between differences in academic ability. This argument, he feels, leads to the assumption that we are more seriously concerned with athletic ability than we are with intelligence. Thus it could appear that inequality is ultimately a social and economic issue not an educational one. As Jencks (1986) has stated, the possible existence of differences in academic talent no

more threatens the notion of equality than does the existence of differences in athletic talent.

SUMMARY/CONCLUSIONS/IMPLICATIONS

Summary of Literature Review

The purpose of this paper was to review the current literature related to the issue of elitism as a perceived negative characteristic of gifted programs. The review addressed two questions: (1) What are the bases for the arguments of the existence of elitism in gifted programming?, and (2) How are the arguments of elitism being defended by educators of the gifted? In seeking the answers to these questions, the writer focused on four issues: (1) the program issue, (2) the child issue, (3) the label issue, and (4) the political issue as they related to the charges of elitism in programming for the gifted.

The issue receiving the greatest emphasis in the literature was the charge that gifted programs in and of itself is elitist. The bases for this perception were two fold. First of all, according to the literature, there is question as to the

rationale of the need for special programs for the gifted and secondly, were the identification procedures used to identify gifted students as elitist.

Scholars in the field of gifted education answer the criticisms that gifted programs are elitist in three ways. The first deals with the notion of equal treatment. Gifted students deserve an educational program that is a good match to their needs and abilities. Providing instructional programs that match individual needs is not elitist any more than developing special instruction for the handicapped student. The gifted should not be punished for being different.

The second way deals with the notion of equal outcomes. It should be understood that gifted programs are not privileges, they are merely an attempt to meet the needs of an identified population. The perception that the gifted will make it on their own is not substantiated through research.

The last deals with the issue of equal access. This issue is used to address the

identification criticism of gifted programs. According to the scholars in the field, the procedures used in identification need to be inclusive. For example, students should be identified and placed in gifted programs through the use of multiple measures that identify the specific aptitudes the program is addressing. It is also important that good identification procedures be used to yield information about students that (1) are accountable, (2) is inclusive and (3) can guide program development.

The child issue is centered upon the criticism that children who participate in gifted programs develop an elitist attitude. The literature showed that this criticism is based upon the fear that special programming for the gifted will create an elite. Scholars in the field of gifted education answer this criticism in two ways. First of all, according to the literature, there is no evidence to support the conclusion that intellectual differences create elitist attitudes among those identified as being gifted. In fact, when gifted students are grouped

homogeneously, they are humbled by finding peers who know as much or more than they do. Second, if we do not program for the gifted because we are afraid of the possibility that they may develop feelings of superiority, we are saying two things: 1) that it is all right for teachers to allow students to underachieve, and 2) that we believe it is not possible to help gifted students distinguish between a healthy self-concept and negative feelings of superiority.

The label issue addresses the charge that the label gifted creates elitist attitudes. The literature showed that this criticism is based upon the inference that gifted children are somehow especially privileged or more worthy than other children. Scholars in the field of gifted education recognize the negative attitudes associated with the term gifted and answer this criticism in two ways. First of all, according to them, it is best to label the service rather than the students. Educators should replace the notion of the gifted child with the concept of gifted behavior. Second, it is suggested that the word

underserved be used in place of gifted. The term underserved has less negative ramifications and is a better word to describe the service being provided.

The final issue that was reviewed in the literature was the political issue. The criticism directed at the political issue is that it is undemocratic to develop unique programs for the gifted. The literature showed that this criticism is based upon the concerns of equality and excellence. According to scholars in the field of gifted education, it is the inaccurate association of intellectual excellence with social inequality that seems to fuel the resistance to special programs for the gifted. They answer the criticisms in two ways. First, they point out that the argument is based on the idea that a democratic society is not one that ignores individual differences and needs; rather it is one that supports them and deals with them wisely. Second, they emphasize that equal educational treatment of inherently unequal children is not democratic: it is simply bad education.

Conclusions

From a historical perspective, the predominant reason for initiating gifted education programs was to offer an educational program that would meet the diverse needs of a special population of students whose needs were not being met in the regular school curriculum. However, it is evident from this study that the belief that gifted education serves the privileged remains a powerful force that sometimes tends to undermine contemporary gifted education programs. It is crucial, therefore, that educators of the gifted at all levels understand the bases for the arguments of elitism in gifted programming as well as be able to provide reasonable arguments countering these charges. As long as there is the misconception that gifted education is unfair or elitist, there will be public scrutiny about the need or values of gifted programming.

It is also evident from this study that the school, through the development of defensible educational programs, must be committed to offering the highest quality education available

to all students in order to achieve the excellence that is demanded by contemporary society. Gifted education is not a luxury; it is merely a program developed to meet the individual needs of a special population of students.

One can also conclude from this study that identification procedures in gifted education need to be multidimensional in order to diminish the probability of discrimination against any student, regardless of race, sex, socio-economic status, and previous educational experiences to appropriate services. The literature demonstrates that one major effect of labeling students as gifted is the subsequent development of negative societal connotations. In order to avoid these problems, educators should replace the notion of the gifted child with the concept of gifted behavior. If educators are to use labels, it is probably best to label the service, not the child.

It becomes evident from this study that when critics attack gifted programs on the basis of inequality, they may, in reality, be attacking the democratic principle of the rights of all

citizens. Kurt Vonnegut Jr. satirically demonstrated the absurdity of equalizing all citizens in his short story "Harrison Bergeron".

The reason for this enforced equality was that people who were outstanding in various ways were given handicaps. Those that could dance well had to wear sandbags on their feet, those who were strikingly good looking had to wear a mask so as not to embarrass those who did not have those characteristics. And those with high intellectual ability ... had a little mental handicap in their ears.... (p. 7)

From the literature it is clear that, when discussing the issues of equality in gifted education, it is important to know which issue is being addressed: (1) equal treatment, (2) equal outcomes, or (3) equal access. Gifted students are not entitled to a better education than other students, but they do deserve an education that matches their needs and abilities. Individuals are not equal in their abilities, talents,

motivation, or achievements; and it is unreasonable to expect one type of educational program to meet all of the diverse needs of each child. To imply that a single education curriculum can meet the needs of every individual is unrealistic.

Implications for Further Research

The results of this study indicate the need for education directed at informing people about the goals and practices in gifted education and in answering the concerns directed at gifted programming, particularly the problem of elitism. When our schools meet the needs of all students and promote excellence in all children, then, and only then, may the cries of elitism in gifted programming be silenced.

Research needs to be conducted to clarify why the term gifted possesses such strong, negative emotional connotations in our society. Research also needs to be conducted to determine the effect the label gifted has on children as well as the effect the issues of elitism may have on students

identified and served by gifted programs. Another issue that needs further research is the issue of labeling and what can be done to get away from the concerns of labeling gifted students.

The issue of equality and excellence is a very complex problem. Indeed, the notion of equality may not be the appropriate measuring device for evaluating the appropriateness of gifted education. Perhaps the best measuring device would be the amount of discrepancy between what a student is capable of doing and what the instructional environment allows or challenges him or her to do. It would be interesting to see how this particular argument might affect the identification of students to be served in a gifted program and also how society would react to such logic.

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