

Running Head: Gifted Public

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The Evolution of the Gifted Child's Education in Public Schools

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Gifted education is often controversial. Because the definitions and realms of “gifted” are not clearly defined, many educators have difficulty developing proper educational programs for the gifted students. Naively, many parents, teachers, and administrators ignore the gifted students, adopting an attitude that suggests the gifted student will succeed despite less-personalized instruction. Public schools are especially concerned with the gifted child’s education, because these schools often receive less training and resources to directly deal with gifted children.

In the wake of President Bush’s No Child Left Behind Act, public schools are now being pressured to modify their educational strategies towards the slower students. An increasingly larger amount of time and resources are being spent on the percentage of students who are learning at a slower rate than the other students. As a result, the pace of public school courses is lessening. While this tactic offers advantages, the most important being accountability for every child, teacher, school, and district, the repercussions of this shift should be fully explored. Several children, particularly the more advanced (gifted), now face even more problems in achieving their full potential. According to the Davidson Institute for Talent Development, “No Child Left Behind is promoting underachievement among our nation’s brightest students, denying an appropriately challenging education to millions” (2006). A stronger emphasis, with more focus on age-specific gifted programs and philosophy, should be placed on gifted education in public schools so that educators are not abandoning one group to aid another.

Gifted children are an invaluable resource for public schools. Peer education is a proven, effective teaching strategy; however, for this procedure to work, at least one

student must sufficiently understand the material. Gifted children are an excellent source of peer education because they possess a foot in both spheres: the knowledge and understanding of the material and the connection and perception to explain their knowledge in ways that their peers can understand. Basically, when gifted children leave the public schools, they take their talents, abilities, and resources with them. The reality among public schools is that we are living “in an era where test scores are used to reward and punish districts, [and] schools lose when gifted children leave the testing pool” (Davidson, 2005). It is essential that public schools do everything within their means to not only retain their gifted students, but effectively use these students through instruction that adequately challenges them.

Recently, parents of gifted students have naively become more concerned simply with the existence of a gifted education program instead of the ways in which their child’s accommodations are being fulfilled (Delisle, 2002). Most gifted education programs in public schools for younger students follow closely to the “pull-out” philosophy. In this tactic, gifted children are taken out of their normal classes for (usually) an hour per week and placed in a room with other gifted students their age. Here, these students have access to resources that normally are not present. They participate in brain teasers, projects, and general inductive learning strategies (Tomlinson, 1995, 5). The problem with this technique, Delisle argues, stems from the absence of a connection between the resource instruction and the “normal” classroom instruction. In effect, they do not allow “gifted children to see the relationships that exist between being ‘gifted on Tuesdays’ and what happens during the rest of the school week” (2002). Better communication between resource teachers and classroom teachers must

develop in order for there to be complete integration of learning in the minds of the gifted students.

Gifted educational programs in middle school education often provide a transition between the “pull-out” technique of elementary schools and the more independent, Honors/AP systems that high schools offer. Middle schools, specifically, tend to view any attempt at homogenous classroom education with a skeptical eye, and thus discourage any setting where equity among students is eliminated. However, as Tomlinson points out, the “benefits of ability grouping for advanced learners” has been documented, and many middle schools are making more of an effort to implement these environments more consistently (1995, 3). More and more, educators are trying to create classroom environments that include more “enrichment” opportunities for all students, not just “gifted,” so that the necessity for programs that address only advanced students is not as severe. This policy, in addition to easing the conflict between excellence versus equity, encourages social interaction with all students in a healthy, heterogeneous environment.

One of the strongest components of middle school gifted education remains its shift into education in specialized fields. In coordination with their egalitarian philosophy, middle school educators discourage generalized labels such as “gifted,” but instead promote a more specified recognition such as “gifted in math” or “gifted in science” (Tomlinson, 1995, 4). And when exclusive instruction for the gifted is given, it is done so within the field of the particular talent. A rift traditionally exists between middle school education and gifted education and is perpetuated by the excessive use of

cooperative learning strategies where gifted students are required to assume the teacher's role and not just assist in teaching certain curriculum, but teaching curriculum "at or below grade level" (Guerrero, 1995, 5). Through the previously mentioned strategies, gifted educators and middle school educators can reach an agreement on how to best facilitate the needs of the brightest students.

Too often, gifted education in high schools relies on strictly Honors and AP classes to satisfy the needs for gifted students. But these courses typically function as regular class with simply more in-depth coverage of the material or, in many cases, simply more material to cover. While these courses are useful for challenging the gifted student, they "rarely meet the needs of students talented in the state-mandated areas of creativity, leadership, and the visual and performing arts" (Howard, 1999, 10).

Because high schools are more geared towards pre-professional and professional preparation, effective high school gifted education should, according to Howard, incorporate a variety of programs and options that adequately addresses several spheres of the student's learning processes (1999, 14). In addition to AP and Honors classes, competent high schools offer their gifted students independent study, seminars, and mentorships (Howard, 1999, 14). These programs fulfill the gifted student's desire for leadership and creative outlets. Additionally, high school education in general, as opposed to elementary school education, emphasizes "content over process;" however, gifted education particularly must strengthen the process skills by "intertwining" them with content knowledge" (Howard, 1999, 75). Through the establishment of these programs and a continued emphasis on learning processes, gifted education in high

schools can sufficiently fulfill its main goal: prepare the students for their professional lives.

Public school education for the gifted, admittedly, contains problems. Many of these problems stem from ignorance and lack of research – problems which are just recently being alleviated. The evolution of the gifted child's education – from elementary school to high school – changes dramatically, and the present inadequacies must be changed before these invaluable resources leave the public schools for good. Many good ideas and programs are already in place, but only through exposure to proven, effective methods can the future of gifted education be changed for the best.

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