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Gifted Education: Education for the Gifted or Education for All?

Abstract
Despite a growing interest among educators in the field of gifted education, there are still concerns that appropriate provision for gifted students is still not occurring. This article suggests that a lack of teacher training and a misuse of terminology may be contributing to the problem. There is also a suggestion that the lack of consensus among experts in the field is adding to the problem. There appears to be a trend away from the concept of provision for the gifted as a select group with special needs to a system of enriched education for all to develop talents. This trend may be driven by misunderstanding, political correctness and fears of elitism. However, giftedness, as a human condition differentiated from the norm, still exists, no matter what we call it and whether we like it or not. Those who have this condition require our understanding and support.

Gifted Education: A New field of Expertise.
Technical and professional terminology can present some difficulty for the lay person. Because they have no training in that profession, they are unfamiliar with the attributes and skills of that area and so may misinterpret the terms used to describe a function or instrument. For instance, those new to the computer industry are faced with ‘RAM’, ‘bytes’ and ‘floppies’. The lay person who uses computers would probably be able to tell you that the ‘P200 with 32 Meg EDO RAM’ is faster than a ‘486’ but not be able to tell you why. There is an even greater illusion of expertise with the person who sets up in business as a Computer Repairer, who knows how to ‘fix’ computers, uses all the latest terminology but still doesn’t really understand how a computer ‘works’. Gifted education in Australia is a relatively new field of interest, therefore most people have little training in this area. The corresponding lack of understanding or misuse of terminology is a major problem in the area of gifted education and is one reason why educational provision for gifted children is often assumed to have been completed when education for all becomes ‘gifted’.

The term ‘gifted education’ is used to describe the field of study of gifted children that is concerned with their educational provision. Because it is termed ‘education’, it forms a subset of the education system. This means that it also falls under the professional field of teachers. While teachers may be classified as experts in the field of education, they cannot, in general, be classified as experts, or even technicians, in the field of gifted education because they receive little or no training in this specific field as part of their education degree. ‘The analysis of gifted education in the country showed its shortcomings most of which are due to the lack of appropriate teacher training.’ (Popova, 1993, p122 in Hany & Heller, 1993) ‘Special teacher training for teaching and guiding the learning of gifted is still unusual in Europe.’ (Ojanen, 1993, p110 in Hany & Heller, 1993)

The Victorian Department of Education states that ‘Teachers need to be well informed about the academic and social/emotional characteristics and needs of both achieving and underachieving gifted students. Such information will enable them to recognise, formally
identify and provide both learning opportunities and an appropriate environment to assist these students to achieve to capacity.’ (DOE, 1996, p3) This assumes that teachers do not have this information as part of their regular training (‘teachers need to’) and that the acquisition of this information ‘will’ (in the future) enable them ‘to assist these students to achieve to capacity.’ A concern for provision for the gifted is the tenancy for the need of teacher professionalism to extend into gifted education simply because this a teacher related domain. This process produces the teacher ‘repairer’, who uses all the ‘gifted’ terminology, thinks they know how to ‘fix’ gifted children but doesn’t have the expertise to know how they ‘work’.

Defining the Terms: General.
For the purpose of this discussion, gifted children are defined as those having the attribute of giftedness, who, by having this attribute form a differentiated sub-set of all children. As Annemarie Roeper says ‘Gifted children are different from the day they are born; they don’t become different all of a sudden. Newborn babies have an awareness, a liveliness, and, sometimes a nervousness that is quite apparent.’ (Roeper, 1995) They are statistically deviant from the normal population. ‘Gifted students can be characterised by their advanced capacities to understand meaning, to reason, to make connections and to deal with abstractions. They learn faster and at a greater level of sophistication than other students in their class.’ (DOE, 1996, p3) These are all characteristics that could be grouped under the heading of high intelligence. ‘Gifted and talented children are those identified by professionally qualified persons who by virtue of outstanding abilities are capable of high performance.’ (Marland, 1972, p10) Marland then defined high performance as achievement or potential in any of six areas of human endeavour, of which ‘general intellectual ability’ is only one. If teachers consider themselves or are considered by others to be ‘professionally qualified persons’ capable of selecting gifted children, the terms ‘outstanding abilities’ and ‘high performance’ may be misinterpreted by them to mean only the area of academic or sporting achievement that forms part of the regular school curriculum objectives. Selection of gifted students is then determined by the need of the school to produce desired outcomes.

Defining the Terms: Specific
Leading writers and researchers have developed specific definitions of giftedness that include thinking, learning styles and function of the brain, such as Clark (1988); Gardner (1983); Necka (1991); Renzulli (1981); and Sternberg (1985); giftedness as a genetic trait, Gagné (1997) and Roeper (1995); giftedness as the result of creativity, Cropley (1994); Heller (1991) and Matyushkin (1990) and intrapersonal attributes such as identity development and self-awareness, Gross (1997); Roeper (1998) and Silverman (1998). These definitions try to move away from the more traditional and questionable definition of gifted as high intelligence defined by IQ tests, those having an IQ of 130+ being ‘in’ and all others being ‘out’. (Gallagher, 1975, p13) The IQ test still remains a useful and valid method of identification of some gifted children, given that there are limitations the testing procedure. It is important to remember that it does not test intelligence per se but rather some socially defined and presently socially accepted products of intelligence. It should be used in conjunction with other forms of identification, such as parent
nomination, teacher nomination, peer nomination, self nomination, creativity assessment and aptitude assessment. (Braggett, 1992, p37)

For the terms of this discussion, Gayné’s (1985) distinctions have been adopted that define ‘giftedness’ as having untrained and spontaneously expressed natural (genetic) abilities, (which may be only potential, not recognised or developed) while ‘talents’ designates the superior mastery of systematically developed abilities or skills. Natural ability is a constituent of talent and one cannot be talented without first being gifted. However one can be gifted without having an expressed talent and talent is not merely being good at something but having a statistically abnormal attribute. Creativity is placed under the heading of ‘Giftedness Aptitude Domains’, in this model, along with intellectual reasoning/memory/observation, etc, as a particular aptitude of a gifted individual. These attributes are all quantitative in nature, being ‘higher’, ‘more’, and ‘superior’, with the gifted threshold for both the giftedness and talent concepts set at the top 10% of the relevant reference group.

Defining the Terms: Chaos Theory.
Roeper’s (1995) viewpoint of giftedness includes a combination of unusual awareness, emotional sensitivity, and uneven development which leads to an inability to fit in and tries to describe the observations of gifted children that have been made by many writers concerning the unusual development patterns and the development of personal identity. (Cropley, 1994; Gross, 1997; Webb, Meckstroth & Tolan, 1991, p16; Wieczerkowski & Prado, 1991) Roeper’s work inspired a new conception of giftedness as asynchronous development. (Silverman, 1995 in Roeper, 1995) This phrase was first used as a characteristic of giftedness by the Columbus Group. (1991) However, this attempt to clarify the definition of giftedness has not produced consensus among leading experts. Françoys Gagné (1997a, b) and Martha Morelock (1997a, b) have openly battled out the definition of giftedness in recent journal articles. Morelock has advanced the Columbus Group definition while Gagné has stated that ‘asynchronous’ actually means precocious development and therefore is not an attribute of giftedness but is the consequence of giftedness. Definitions become even more confused when experts interchange the term ‘gifted’ with ‘intelligence’, ‘talented’, ‘high ability’, and ‘high achievement’. If specialists in the field cannot agree on definitions, what hope do teachers have in defining giftedness and thereby identifying the gifted children in their class?

Gifted Education for Gifted Students.
IQ score, as a deviation from the norm, is used as justification for special provision for intellectually disabled people. No such right to special provision appears for the opposite end of the IQ scale. ‘In other words, the gifted are, as a minority group, about as unprotected legally as any minority group can be.’ (Sternberg, 1995) However, this recognition of differentiation of gifted from the normal population, forms the rationale for some sort of differentiated provision. ‘They require programs that are significantly different from those provided for most other students in a classroom... Research indicates that gifted students who are not receiving challenging educational provision may become bored, frustrated and lack motivation. They may, as a consequence, underachieve and develop social and behaviour problems.’ (DOE, 1996, p3) The
Victorian DOE therefore advocates differentiated curriculum not as an individual right but as a form of crisis prevention strategy. Marland (1972) stated that differentiated educational provisions were needed for the benefit and survival of democracy itself. Betts & Tuttle (1994); Parker (1989); Passow (1991); Roeper (1995); Schultz & Delisle (1997); Smith (1986); Sorenson (1988); Sternberg (1995); Van Tassel-Baska (1988); Webb, Meckstroth & Tolan (1991); and many others also agree that gifted students need differentiated curriculum, that is education for gifted students.

**Definitions Deleted, Diverted or Diluted.**

The problem now becomes four fold. Firstly, the lack of expertise of teachers in the field of gifted education when they are the professionals required to provide for these children; secondly, which definition of giftedness do teachers accept in order to identify the gifted children in their class and differentiate the curriculum; thirdly, what do teachers believe constitutes differentiated curriculum and do they actually implement it; and fourthly, the personal attitude towards giftedness and towards gifted children of teachers as a special group within society. The lack of knowledge of the field is compounded by a lack of interest, prevailing myths, and even open hostility towards gifted children. (Webb et al 1991, p1; Marjoram, 1988, p17) ‘There are many signs, I believe, all of which lead us to the same conclusion, namely, that of a negative view toward the gifted. And I want to emphasise that I am talking about negative here, not just benign indifference.’ (Sternberg, 1995)

Janet Engelsgjerd (1988, p7 in Sorenson, 1988) advocates a simple solution to this problem: ‘Clearly, no one definition (of giftedness) is right for everybody. Each school district must work out a definition that reflects the student body, resources, and facilities. This definition will ultimately determine which students are selected for the district’s program as well as how the district encourages its gifted students’ growth. Only the people who work directly with each district can make appropriate plans for a workable gifted program.’ In other words, because the definitions are problematic for teachers, the teachers should make up a definition of giftedness for themselves that fits who they think will benefit from the program they have implemented, confined by resources and facilities.

Morelock (1996) solves the problem by defining giftedness as a form of development and talent - a ‘multi-level potential for domain-specific creative-productivity which can be fostered through appropriate identification and environmental support.’ This terminology is impressive and implies expertise. She then states, ‘We need to assume that some level of talent is present in all children, and it is our responsibility to discover it in all children.’ (Morelock, 1996) Gifted education is therefore not differentiated curriculum for the gifted, but is environmental support necessary for all children to foster their talents. This definition is promoted despite the generally held view that talent always denotes some form of above-average achievement. (Gayné, 1997) Alternatively, providing an environment that allows all children to develop their talents may be seen to be egalitarian, politically correct or a method of overcoming any identification problems. The theory being that if the environment is satisfactory, the truly gifted students will automatically achieve their true potential and rise to the top.
Tom Marjoram (1988, p17) states that ‘Teachers are, in any case, more reluctant than lay people to brandy such terms as “gifted” or “talented” and “very able” and indeed this as it should be. Education is not about labelling but about helping every child to do his or her best from whatever starting point’ and ‘...the notion of the ablest as a privileged elite is rightly being eroded.’ (1988, p18) This method would delete all gifted terminology altogether.

Braggett (1992, p30) states that in order to avoid a perceived elitism of separate classes, teachers have ‘come up with the need to provide for the gifts and talents of all children.’ This is the same of view as Morelock (1996), that is gifted education for all model. ‘This type of approach is one which few, if any, teachers can reject: it concentrates on individual differences.’ (Braggett, 1992, p31) Braggett then admits that this does not necessarily provide for ‘those who are capable of the highest performance’, who are likely to be forgotten in the egalitarian thrust for provision for all. (1992, p31) He concludes that, while the recognised need to provide for the gifts and talents of all is simply good education, it is also necessary to target ‘accelerated learners’ to cater for their specialised learning. (1991, p31)

‘Accelerated learners’ would seem to be a term applied to mean those who have, or who have the potential to have, advanced development. Accelerated learners are perhaps those whom others would call gifted. He states, however, that ‘.....teachers are more likely to confine their nominations (of accelerated learners) to those children who are well dressed, work neatly, do their homework, do not disturb the class and obtain good marks. They are less likely to select non-conforming youngsters who work independently, who have an idiosyncratic style, who are highly creative, who disagree with the teacher or who are tactless, rude and critical.’ (p39) A conforming child is more highly valued by the teacher because they exemplify educational objectives but the definition of a non-conforming child in this instance, more closely resembles the characteristics of giftedness. (Gallagher, 1975, p23 & Webb et al, 1982, p18)

Parker (1989) doesn’t worry about definitions of gifted and talented other than a mention of the Marland Report (1971) in the Preface of her book. She defines the rationale for ‘differentiated programming’ as ‘We must, however, examine the reasons why gifted education is essential for the survival of our democratic society. If the gifted students in today’s schools are to become tomorrow’s leaders, we must make leadership training a major goal of programs for the gifted.’ (1989, p2) Gifted education for gifted children is thus simplified to a training program to meet society’s need to produce leaders.

A Bright Future?
The DOE (1996) gifted students Policy set out the framework for gifted education in Victoria. It clearly states a definition of giftedness that recognises the differences and special needs of gifted children. The policy also defines the reason for differentiated curriculum and gives specific examples for teachers to use, such as enrichment, extension, acceleration and mentor programs. The problem has been an ongoing lack of understanding of those working in the field, combined with a misinterpretation, either by
accident or intent, of the terminology and definitions of gifted education. If the definition of gifted moves from an exclusion model as defined by the DOE (1996) and Gagné (1997) to an inclusion model as defined by Braggett (1992) and Morelock (1997) because of some fear of elitism or misunderstanding of giftedness, then provision for those generally defined as gifted will become merely some sort of enriched environment for all, using methods such Bloom’s Taxonomy of Educational Objectives (1964) and de Bono’s Six Thinking Hats (1985). There are signs that the inclusion concept is fostering the scrapping of the term gifted in favour of the term talented, then directing efforts towards talent development - ‘a sort of create your own gifted child model’. (Ronvik, 1993) There needs to be some agreement on the definitions of major constructs, the terms giftedness and talent, and goals and principles as a starting point for a foundation of a good conceptual framework. (Gagné, 1997)

‘The students who should be in gifted programs are those whose mental abilities are advanced to such a degree that the regular school program simply does not meet their needs; anything else is politics... We must require every workshop consultant, every conference presenter, every journal contributor to distinguish more carefully between that which is good teaching for all students and that which is uniquely suited to the gifted and is both unnecessary for and impossible of accomplishment by students of lesser ability.’ (Ronvik, 1993) As one enlightened man once wrote, ‘Recognition of inequality, of human diversity, only refers to specific traits, abilities, behaviour patterns; its does not imply general superiority or inferiority.’ (Eysenck, 1975, p23) The recognition of giftedness as such an inequality is necessary before any provisions can be made that are relevant to those gifted children who, by the extent of their differentiation from the normal population, require gifted education.

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