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ABSTRACT

This paper examines issues concerned with the administration of programs for gifted and talented students, especially those in Ohio. The problem of defining giftedness is considered noting expansion of the Ohio definition to include 12 percent of the student population of which only 48 percent are currently being served by any special program. Economic and political concerns about the role education for the gifted should play are discussed and criticisms of gifted programs (e.g., curriculum is often disjointed and fragmented) identified. Alternative approaches to serving the gifted are briefly compared including pull out grouping practices, serving gifted students in the regular classroom, teaching creative thinking, and compacting the regular curriculum. Other specific administrative concerns are addressed including staff development, program image, evaluation of programs for the gifted, and counseling for gifted students. Programs for the gifted are seen to positively impact regular education. Administrators of programs for the gifted are encouraged to collaborate with other educators to gain their support. (DB)

Local Administration of Programs for the Gifted and Talented

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Introduction

In 1981, a handful of educators got together to share experiences and ideas about designing programs for gifted students. They founded what is known as the Consortium of Ohio Coordinators for the Gifted (COCG), an organization of administrators of gifted programs. A decade later, COCG furnishes support and leadership for members representing city, local, and exempted village school districts in virtually every county of the state. The organization's mission is "to promote the professional growth of coordinators who facilitate appropriate education of gifted and talented children."

What is "appropriate education" for the gifted and talented? During the 10 years of COCG's existence, the definition of giftedness, the identification process, curricular guidelines, and program planning for gifted children have continued to evolve to help develop an answer to this question. These are just several of the issues that coordinators and administrators of programs for the gifted have addressed in their effort to facilitate appropriate education for gifted and talented children.

Administrators of programs for the gifted face additional challenges. They must deal with political and economic issues that affect programs for the gifted. They must help to define their role in the overall education program of the school district and help to fit services to the gifted and talented into the philosophy of the regular education program. They must be concerned about staff development, program image, and evaluation of program effectiveness. They must articulate the benefits that services for the gifted provide to all students.

Definition of Giftedness

A major issue that has direct implications for the regular school population is the definition of giftedness. Without a doubt, appropriate definition of the population of gifted students who will receive services should precede any identification process. Without having a clear understanding of what gifted means in a particular community, appropriate programming cannot occur.

A conscientious approach must be implemented to determine who indeed is gifted. Educators, particularly administrators, should recognize that giftedness is a relative term and that the majority of the student population will provide the definition by which gifted students will later be identified. While deviation IQ can be a legitimate means of identifying a small percentage of the gifted population, such a definition of giftedness may have no bearing on the programs in a particular school system.

It is possible that giftedness will be defined according to whom a particular school system considers to be the students for whom differentiated education is merited or can be provided. Obviously, once giftedness is defined, there is a change in the perception that other students and adults will have for those students identified as gifted. Therefore, great care must be used so that these gifted students are not needlessly labeled or segregated from the regular student population.

In the early 1980s, many districts with programs for the gifted focused on "pull-out" or resource room models as a way of meeting gifted students' needs. With these models, it was considered "appropriate" to focus on academically or intellectually gifted students and to give them thinking skills instruction and stimulation of creative thought to supplement what was occurring in regular classrooms.

In 1987, Ohio law required that the identification of gifted children shall include not only those students with cognitive and academic abilities but also those with creative thinking and visual and/or performing arts abilities. Statistics for 1991 showed that there were 220,963 identified gifted students in Ohio; this was approximately 12% of the total student population. Of those identified students, 137,843, or 62%, were not served by any special program or educational option. Additionally, many of those who were counted as served may have received a minimum of attention through only one program option.

The means by which educators undertake the identification of gifted students can have a significant impact on the regular classroom. The identification process will affect the way in which classrooms operate and the way teachers teach. As students are tested and determined to be gifted or have a particular talent, their presence in class may be positively or negatively perceived. Those perceptions may influence the way the teacher delivers instruction to students in that classroom.

Economic and Political Concerns

Providing services for the gifted and talented has economic repercussions. Two positions emerge. The first is that gifted education is a viable means of encouraging and assuring the survival of American society and, therefore, large amounts of money should be expended on it. The other position is that such funds should be devoted to programs for those less able in an effort to bring them into the mainstream. Given that the available funding is limited, both positions have important implications.

This economic concern leads to political issues. In the political arena, an important question must be answered: What role should education for the gifted play at the local, state, and national levels? Although American society has acknowledged the necessity for improved performance from its youth, particularly the most academically gifted and talented, adequate commitment to the appropriate education of these students has not been widely embraced.

Several state legislatures have mandated the creation of state schools patterned after the North Carolina School for Mathematics and Science. The U.S. Department of Education has endorsed the creation of 535 magnet schools to serve as models for national education improvement. As well-intentioned as these proposals may be, there remains little likelihood that they will result in improved education for most students. A much more productive solution would be for administrators of programs for the gifted to extend services for the gifted into the regular classroom, thereby benefiting greater numbers of students, including those who are gifted.

Another political issue pertains to the philosophy of the program for the gifted, which must be compatible to that of the regular education program. The educator who develops a program for gifted children must recognize that the theoretical underpinnings on which the program is to be built must fit reasonably well within the philosophy of the school district's regular education program. That is, the program for the gifted cannot be something that exists in isolation or that operates on a different level but must be linked to the general education program in the school system.

The socioeconomic status of students who typically are selected to participate in programs for the gifted creates public relations problems in many cases because students who are the recipients of services for the gifted often represent the more advantaged populations. Administrators of programs for the gifted must shift the focus from these advantaged students and find ways to identify and serve larger segments of the gifted student population, including those who are economically disadvantaged and others who are historically underserved.

It may be difficult to convince a community that specialized programs for a limited number of students merit the expenditure of the school district's capital. By also providing services to the gifted in the regular classroom setting, many other students will benefit. If a broader base of students receive curricular specialization or extension through such services, there will be increased appreciation of and support for these programs and more willingness to provide academic challenges beyond those that the district may currently offer.

In those school districts where services to the gifted are just being initiated, the gifted program administrator must take time to build a reasonable foundation and not attempt to operate programs that do not have the support of faculty, other administrators, parents, and the board of education. There must be better marketing to spread the gospel of the good things that programs for the gifted can do for all students. The administrator must help others realize that programs for the gifted are enhancing education for all students.

Curriculum Challenges

A major criticism of programs for the gifted is that they contain fragmented and disjointed curriculum. This is particularly evident in pull-out classes or resource rooms in which teachers are forbidden to introduce regular content for fear that students will accelerate through the regular curriculum. In such settings, meaningful lessons may be limited. Educators of the gifted are often advised to provide classes that in and of themselves lack substance. In these cases, program administrators must be advocates for teachers of the gifted so that meaningful content and appropriate services can be provided. The objective should be to ensure significant academic experiences that challenge gifted students to further develop their cognitive abilities. With the pressures of constantly changing technology and the need for repeated retraining of the work force, society can neither afford nor tolerate limiting the potential of any child.

Related to the criticism of disjointed curriculum is the charge that there is no systematic planning in programs for the gifted. This is often the result of programs that serve one content area in one grade and a totally different content area in the next grade because regular classroom teachers do not wish their "thunder to be stolen." In such cases, the regular classroom teacher imposes restrictions on programs for the gifted. If content in the gifted classroom cannot encroach on regular classroom work, administrators of programs for the gifted may find that programs have no scope and sequence and little, if any, articulation among grade levels or teachers.

Alternative Approaches to Serving the Gifted

Just how should appropriate services to all gifted and talented children who have been identified be provided? What is the approach to take? Should programs that are separate from regular education be expanded, or is it more "appropriate" to meet gifted students' needs in the regular classroom? The answer is as obvious today as it was in 1981 when COCG was established. Gifted children are best served by providing them with opportunities both outside and inside the regular classroom.

Grouping

For years, gifted programs have operated in isolation. These programs place gifted students into groups with their ability-level peers who leave the regular classroom to receive attention. The students, who often meet in small groups — whether by pull-out, add-on, or creative scheduling — receive important and vital services. Their giftedness is dealt with through units of study, special projects, and time spent together on a day-to-day or week-to-week basis, which facilitate challenging interaction of gifted students with their peers.

Special programs for gifted students at all levels must continue to be designed, implemented, and evaluated so that these students spend some time with their intellectual peers. These special programs for gifted students are important to the students' understanding of their educational and intellectual needs. In addition to presenting gifted students with challenging curriculum, special programs may introduce additional opportunities outside the school district and may serve as a link to universities, colleges, and other institutions and organizations that create evening, weekend, and summer experiences for gifted students.

Serving Gifted Students in the Regular Classroom

Special programs that group gifted children with others of similar ability are still needed. At the same time, however, services to the gifted need to be extended into the regular classroom for the benefit of both gifted and nongifted students. This is especially important today because American society has recognized the economic necessity of improving education for all of our children in an effort to reverse the downward spiral of American productivity. This twofold approach to providing an appropriate education both in and out of the regular classroom is the focus of gifted programming in Ohio today.

The preparation of new teachers and the retraining of existing teachers need to be improved so that all teachers can enhance the gifted student's entire school day. By training teachers to challenge gifted students and focus on the potential of each individual child, *all* students in the classroom are affected. In 1981, retraining classroom teachers seemed too large a task to undertake; today it is an imperative one.

Increased emphasis on personnel preparation to help regular classroom teachers better understand and meet the needs of gifted children is of paramount importance. Gifted program administrators and special program teachers need to broaden their scope to include not only providing for gifted students but also offering assistance to regular classroom teachers.

Teaching Creative Thinking

Ohio's *Rule for School Foundation Units for Gifted Children,* adopted by the State Board of Education in 1984, stated that "appropriate education" for the gifted shall consist of at least five hours of instructional services per week, which includes higher-level thinking, critical thinking, divergent thinking, logical reasoning, creative problem solving, research methods, interpersonal relations, and oral and written expression. Gifted program administrators, with the help of COCG, clarified goals and objectives related to these curricular topics and included them in their programs in a clearer, more comprehensive fashion than before.

Critical thinking skills, those that deal with analysis and organization, are often quickly adopted and understood. Such skills — classifying, outlining, and identifying fact and opinion — are universally taught. However, *creative* thinking skills, those that deal with perception and reasoning, are less universally accepted and practiced. Gifted program teachers regularly teach creative thinking skills to their gifted and talented students, but regular

classroom teachers generally do not teach creative thinking skills in their classrooms.

Open-ended and higher-level questioning strategies often generate responses that are unique, inherently elusive, and difficult and time-consuming to evaluate. Open-ended questions often result in divergent student responses that take the class in a direction that is very different from lesson goals and objectives. Creative thinking is not easily guided into channels with which many traditional classroom teachers feel comfortable, especially in an age of accountability.

Despite the fact that creative skills can be developed, teachers often fail to include lessons on creative problem solving or lessons designed to increase fluency, flexibility of thought, and the abilities to imagine and to be inventive. Indeed, creative thinking is sometimes interpreted as an artistic quality rather than an inventive process. Without sufficient training in the teaching of creative thinking skills, many teachers lack confidence in teaching these skills and thus avoid teaching them at all.

Regular classroom teachers need to learn more about higher-level questioning skills so that they can effectively teach these skills. Gifted program personnel can assist regular classroom teachers by giving them a clearer understanding of thinking skills instruction and how it can be integrated into the curriculum. Administrators of gifted programs should provide a safe environment for teachers to use higher-level questioning as a means of creating better thinkers in the classroom. They should encourage classroom teachers to include more of the difficult-to-evaluate creative thinking skills into their lessons and demonstrate methods for assessing students' application and use of these skills. More students will then be better prepared to analyze and solve problems.

Compacting

Gifted program administrators must equip classroom teachers with the skills they need to focus on all students as individuals, including those who are cognitively, academically, or creatively superior. The concept of assessing what a student already knows in order to eliminate reteaching should become more widely appreciated. The student who has mastered skills that are to be taught to the class as a whole or the student who needs less practice to master new skills is ripe for differentiation through the use of the technique of compacting.

Compacting refers to assessing a student's understanding of curriculum prior to its introduction in the regular classroom, eliminating content that the student already knows, and providing the student with alternative content to enrich or to accelerate. It includes skipping exercises and reducing whole units of study into a few days. This leaves time for individualized projects that can enrich or expand the student's knowledge. Although not a new strategy, compacting is not often employed by teachers because they generally feel compelled to document each step of skill mastery.

Compacting is one tool that teachers may use to alter, or differentiate, the curriculum for gifted students. Another tool to accomplish differentiation is to enlist the students in the process. Teachers should be encouraged to use student interests to plan projects that provide in-depth learning experiences. Gifted students can be encouraged to communicate with their classroom teachers to modify curriculum to meet their specific needs. Collaboration among gifted students, special program teachers, gifted program administrators, and regular classroom teachers can further enhance differentiation of instruction.

Other Administrative Concerns

Staff Development

References to teacher training and retraining have already been made in this chapter. To ensure success, administrators of programs for the gifted must see that proper staff development occurs. The program administrator should attempt to provide continuing education to regular classroom teachers to encourage them to address the needs of gifted students in their classes and in all subject areas as well as to ensure the most complete and comprehensive education for all students.

Gifted program administrators should help both the teacher of the gifted and the regular classroom teacher to understand program goals. Teachers need to recognize their respective roles in the education of students who may be in either teacher's classes at some point in time. To be most effective, teachers of the gifted should not be isolated from the other teachers but should be perceived as significant members of the school staff, making measurable contributions to the productivity of the entire school program and not only to the finite number of students whom they may see only on a limited basis.

Administrators of programs for the gifted can ingratiate themselves with other staff members and produce potential allies by judiciously sharing ideas for modification of classroom instruction. Systematic exchange with the entire teaching staff can contribute to the integration of appropriate components of programs for the gifted into other programs in the district.

Program Image

Tied to economic concerns is the issue of program image. Too frequently, programs for the gifted are viewed as unnecessary frills or programs that take money from regular education. Educators of the gifted must readily retort to the charge that programs for gifted children are frivolous. They must be able to respond with meaningful educational explanations for the novel educational endeavors that teachers introduce into these programs.

To illustrate this point, programs for the gifted often integrate field trips into the curriculum. In and of themselves, field trips may be very beneficial educational experiences that can extend or enrich classroom instruction. This especially is true for academically talented children who see greater implications for many of the educational trips in which they participate. However, educators of the gifted may greatly undermine their programs by arranging frivolous or disjointed field trips that serve only as entertainment or diversion for the students and have no direct correlation to the curriculum.

For example, a trip to a museum that is culminated by lunch at a fast-food restaurant will quite possibly be remembered for the lunch and not for the trip's educational contributions. As returning students trumpet their final stop, disgruntled teachers and regular students may view the program as one for the gastronomically gifted and not for the academically talented. Certainly, this is a disservice to educators who planned a meaningful extension to the curriculum but unfortunately allowed lunch to become the topic of conversation from their returning students. The program administrator might suggest a brown bag lunch as an alternative that would increase the probability that museum artifacts or displays come to mind when students encounter queries about the day.

Evaluation of Programs for the Gifted

Programs for the gifted often lack appropriate goals and objectives. This is often the result of not allowing instruction to be a meaningful part of or supplement to regular classroom instruction. Goals become rather esoteric and have no real meaning in the lives of most children. All too frequently, ill-defined goals and objectives lead to weak evaluations that do not reflect the meaningful instruction that has taken place in the classroom. Whether comparison groups, control groups, or systematic research designs are used to evaluate instruction, ways to evaluate programs for the gifted must be developed to show that these programs have substance and contribute to regular education as well as to the education of gifted students.

Counseling for Gifted Students

A major difficulty that administrators of programs for the gifted must confront is the lack of counseling for academically talented students. A combination of the students' giftedness and their treatment in the regular classroom often creates difficulties for students at the elementary and secondary levels. Because regular classroom educators may not respond to the needs or the learning styles of these students, serious adjustment problems can result. Administrators of programs for the gifted need to be resourceful by collaborating with counselors and school psychologists to find effective ways to help gifted students overcome the difficulties they experience.

Impact of Programs for the Gifted

Partly out of the necessity to provide differentiated teaching strategies and partly due to the talents of the particular educators, programs for the gifted often evidence trends in education long before the regular classroom teacher becomes aware of them. Whether it is the result of the creativity or curiosity of educators of the gifted or the networking to which they belong, programs for the gifted have often been the proving grounds for what becomes mainstream education. Bloom's Taxonomy, the teaching of critical and creative thinking skills, Philosophy for Children, Odyssey of the Mind, and the Future Problem Solving Program are the kinds of educational innovations that at one point were components of the programs for the gifted but gradually became incorporated into regular classroom instruction.

Ideally, programs for the gifted are always in flux. Once instruction, content, or methodology has been developed and proven to work for academically talented children, the administrator should work toward integrating that aspect of the gifted program into the regular classroom. In other words, the program for the gifted may be used as a laboratory or a training ground for instruction or content or methodology that can later be employed on a much broader scale. In such a way, administrators and teachers of the gifted serve their clientele directly but also extend their influence to the entire student population. When larger numbers of students profit from the opportunities provided to the gifted and talented, a broader base of support is generated.

In most cases, regular classroom instruction is adequate because of the nature of the populace within a school system. In other situations there is an obvious discrepancy between what teachers are doing and what they could do. In such cases, then, the administrator of programs for the gifted can serve as a change agent to attempt to lead the district into more productive use of its resources and more profitable education for its children.

To better serve all students, administrators of programs for the gifted must continue to market and maintain programs and services for the gifted in a

meaningful fashion. To accomplish this, they must become collaborators with other educators to gain their support. They must help regular classroom teachers and general educators see value in programs for the gifted and recognize that these programs are not designed to compete with the regular education program for recognition nor are they designed to upstage the regular classroom teacher who must deal with students of all ability levels instead of the select population in programs for the gifted.

An attractive option to some school districts is to adopt programs that are successful in neighboring districts or programs that have set a national example. It is not wise to implement what another district has done unless it can be ascertained that the philosophies, students, and direction are similar in both districts. Unquestionably, there is no one best program for the gifted and talented because what is gifted in one community is not necessarily gifted in another. To be effective, any program must serve the needs of the students in that particular school system.

Conclusion

The role of today's administrator of the program for the gifted is a challenging one, which includes providing classroom teachers with the tools they need to individualize instruction for students whose current mastery of content requires that alternative strategies be employed. If all students are to reach their full potential, it is essential that the regular classroom teacher and the special program teacher work together. Appropriate personnel preparation and insightful administration of services for the gifted will accomplish the desired goal of providing "appropriate education" for those students who have the ability to excel and will simultaneously improve the quality of education for all students.