

Overlooked and Underserved: Gifted Students in Manitoba

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Abstract

Gifted education in Manitoba is neglected by policymakers, leaving gifted students without assurance of access to appropriate consideration in the province's classrooms. The needs of students with intellectual disabilities are addressed and protected by the Public Schools Act, but guidance for understanding and accommodating the needs of gifted learners is lacking. Programming for gifted students is necessary to meet their affective and academic needs. Acceleration, which may take many forms, is an effective intervention that is appropriate for gifted learners; as they stand, Manitoba's guidelines for accommodating student needs do not support acceleration as a viable option for gifted students.

Manitoba's public schools do not attend to the needs of gifted students adequately. The curriculum used in Manitoba's public schools is designed to meet the learning needs of most students (Manitoba, 2006), but there are groups of students with atypical developmental trajectories whose needs are not addressed by the standard curriculum. These trajectories exist at both ends of the IQ scale, but the needs of gifted students are largely unrecognized, while students with cognitive deficits (deservedly) receive attention and support. Although there is substantial focus on students having difficulty fulfilling curricular outcomes, gifted students who may have already met or who can exceed those standards are not addressed in Manitoba's *Public Schools Act (PSA)* (Manitoba, 2020, Regulation 155/205). Wide variation in options for gifted students exists because Manitoba's policies do not ensure broad, consistent access to provisions for those students at the divisional, school, or classroom level. As it is written, Manitoba's policy on varying the curriculum disqualifies gifted students from having Individualized Education Plans (IEPs) (*Student Services*, n.d.). Manitoba policy fails to recognize that gifted students vary significantly from the norm, and that they have a right to differentiations including acceleration, for which there is expansive and consistent research support (Colangelo et al., 2004).

Public school curriculum is targeted toward typical children with typical needs who progress at a typical pace (Manitoba, 2006), but atypical children's needs are not adequately addressed by standard curriculum. Atypical development patterns are characteristic of the 3% of children at both the top and bottom of the IQ scale; these children require educational programming that is significantly different from the programming provided for typical children (Silverman, 2012, Appendix, sect. 23). Collectively, the children at each end of the IQ scale can be considered "exceptional learners"; that is, they are the exception to the rule that their intellectual abilities match those of their chronological peers. Children with significant cognitive deficits score two standard deviations below average on IQ tests, resulting in a score of 70 or below (Diagnostic Criteria, n.d., "Deficits" section, para. 2). At the other end of the IQ scale, a score of 130 (two standard deviations above average on IQ tests) represents the threshold for the identification of giftedness (Silverman, 2019). Educational systems typically ignore the fact that gifted children differ from the norm as significantly as their peers with cognitive deficits.

Both groups of students are atypical, but students with intellectual disabilities receive attention and support while the students at the other end of the spectrum are largely unrecognized. The welfare of students with cognitive deficits both in school and beyond is

justifiably paramount when their educational plans are developed; these students are vulnerable individuals who require support to function with safety and dignity as members of society. Programming for students with intellectual disabilities is widely available, and the legal requirement for these provisions is well understood; the guarantee of appropriate education for gifted students, however, is seldom applied on the same large scale (Kanevsky, 2013). There are members of the education and research community who go so far as to argue that gifted children do not need any special services, and that they should receive consideration only when and if it seems reasonable to offer it (Subotnik et al., 2011). Indeed, even teachers have been found to hold stereotypes about gifted students, causing them to question the need for any support at all (Matheis et al., 2019).

Manitoba's documents focus on students having difficulty fulfilling curricular outcomes, while ignoring those who have already met or can exceed those standards. "Appropriate education" is assured to all children in Canada under the Charter of Rights and Freedoms (Kanevsky, 2013); Manitoba considers the provincial curriculum appropriate educational programming for most students (Manitoba Education, 2010). The *PSA* states that differentiated instruction and adaptations should be in place for those who are having difficulty meeting curricular outcomes, noting that other methods for differentiating instruction or other suitable curricular goals may need to be developed based on the results of specialized assessment (Manitoba, 2020, Regulation 155/205). Inherent in these directions is the assumption that disabilities or deficits are the root cause of many students' difficulties in achieving curricular outcomes. At the same time, the instructions presume that if a student is not having difficulty reaching outcomes, the outcomes must then be suitable for the learner. Additionally, the documents imply that differentiated instruction is a scaffold for struggling students rather than a broad range of practices with strategies that must be applied with consideration for the individual learning profile of each student.

Canada, and Manitoba in particular, relies on a patchwork of policies and provisions about gifted students that vary from division to division, school to school, and even classroom to classroom. Internationally, special education law often does not cover gifted students (Assouline et al., 2015), and Canada is no different. While some provinces have documents focused solely on provisions for gifted students, Manitoba does not (Kanevsky, 2013). Unless a province or territory develops its own official policy for the provision of education to gifted students, nobody holds major responsibility for it (Goguen, 1998). There is a strong relationship between a jurisdiction having a document focused on gifted education and the number of forms of acceleration explicitly supported by that jurisdiction's policies (Kanevsky, 2013); currently, Manitoba has neither. The lack of provision for gifted students in Manitoba policy means that there is no real accountability at any level for providing these students access to specialized programming.

Students with significant cognitive disabilities are required to have IEPs developed as a customized curriculum designed to meet their unique learning needs, but gifted students have no such provision. By virtue of their learning speed and depth of knowledge acquisition, gifted students often have mastered advanced levels of content in subject areas (Subotnik et al., 2011), compared to their chronological peers. For a student to be allowed to work on outcomes different from their age-mates, Manitoba requires that an IEP be developed that modifies the provincial curriculum by changing the number, essence, and content of the curricular outcomes that a student is expected to meet (Student Services, n.d.). VanTassel-Baska and Brown (2007) contended that differentiated specialized curriculum is necessary for gifted students, and Kanevsky (2011) noted that gifted learners, with their facility with abstract understandings and rapid learning, prefer content that is aligned with their capacities, and that is distinctly different from the content preferred by peers. Manitoba policy, however, states that modification is appropriate only for students who have a significant cognitive disability as determined by specialized assessment (Student Services, n.d.). Giftedness does not qualify as a disability for the

purposes of developing IEPs in Manitoba.

Understanding the needs of gifted students is vital to ensuring that they receive appropriate educational programming. Cognitive deficit is one reason why students may underachieve; giftedness is another. Gifted children retained in classes with same-age peers typically underachieve (where underachievement is defined by grades); they also have underachievement thrust upon them in the form of being asked to think in ways and understand concepts beyond which they have already moved (Gross, 2004). Additionally, affective consequences occur when gifted children are kept in the regular classroom working at the regular pace. Many experience lowered self-esteem, anxiety, and social isolation, and the more gifted the learners, the lower their self-concept will be in a regular classroom (Silverman, 2012). Underachievement tends to be maintained when negative self-perceptions and lack of learning skills occur in gifted students (Desmet et al., 2019) when their needs are not met.

Academic acceleration of high-ability youth is one of the most well-researched topics in education (Neihart, 2007), and the results are overwhelmingly positive (Subotnik et al., 2011). Enrichment-type supplementary provisions, including classroom differentiation, do not produce the same compelling level of affirmative research evidence as accelerative options (Colangelo et al., 2004). Acceleration encompasses a variety of strategies, some of which may take place in a classroom with same-age peers (Subotnik et al. 2011). Neihart (2007) claimed that acceleration should be routine for gifted students, and Colangelo et al. (2004) stated that rather than wondering whether a gifted student should be accelerated, educators should instead focus on the best method of acceleration for the student in question. Gifted students flourish when presented with accelerated content, and Manitoba does them a disservice by failing to recognize the importance of differentiation through acceleration.

Closing our eyes to the differences between gifted children and the rest does not change the fact that the differences exist and need to be addressed. As diversity increases in our classrooms, the one-size-fits-most approach to curriculum and differentiation falls short of meeting the needs of gifted students. Every student is guaranteed the right to appropriate education, but Manitoba does not have any regulations enforcing the right to necessary conditions for gifted learners. Mandates to differentiate for all students muddy the waters when clear guidance at all levels of policymaking is lacking, and this lack of consideration damages the mental health and academic growth of gifted students. Until acknowledgement of and support for accelerative options for gifted students is supported by Manitoba's government, their needs will remain subject to the whims of local educational institutions. All students deserve equal access to public school education, but we must not confound equal access with identical outcomes. Gifted students deserve educational goals that move them forward, and guarantee that their learning in our classrooms is intentional, not merely incidental.

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Jennifer Metelski is a graduate student in the Faculty of Education at Brandon University in Brandon, Manitoba. She has an interest in learning about gifted children and adults, and is particularly interested in understanding how lack of gifted identification and gifted-specific education in schools affects adult outcomes.