

Searching for Answers or Creating More Questions? A Response to Robinson

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Grappling with the issues of equity and excellence has become evermore complex, solutions seem more and more remote as the divides between socioeconomic groups become greater and greater, and the ethnic diversity of the student population continues to present ever-increasing stress on the educational system. Robinson's concerns that redress to inequities has been at the expense of a particular subgroup of gifted students are serious. The concerns should spark an important discussion within the field of gifted education and should be an impetus for further examination of the long-term consequences of short-term efforts to achieve equity. As Robinson noted, we may not be achieving equity for any group when we engage in educationally unsound decision making. While the interpretations that Robinson offered of the responses to gifted students and gifted programs are well grounded, I would like to offer some expanded thinking on several of the interpretations she put forward, present some alternative observations and interpretations, and raise related questions about our assumptions in the field of gifted education—and in the field of education, in general—that may have led us astray. I would first like to separate the responses to the equity issues that Robinson has identified as negative—the elimination of self-contained classrooms and the ever-increasing alternative strategies for identifying students from underserved populations—because I see the genesis of these movements resting in different spheres.

Definition and Identification

Looking first at who we identify for gifted programs raises questions about definitions of giftedness, the purposes of schooling for gifted students, and the instrumentation we use in the identification process. Answers to the question of the definition of giftedness, as Robinson points out, influence the breadth of talents we will identify and address in programs for gifted students. And even this question needs to be further divided into questions of the breadth of definition and then connotative and denotative meanings of terms. First, consider Robinson's nondebatable assertion that the major focus of schooling is achievement in the traditional academic realms. Does the acceptance of the stance that schooling is focused

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on academics depend on a consideration of the resource pie as fixed, with the necessary consequence of the addition of services for those with talent in the arts to be the dilution of services in the academic realm? I hope that gifted education will not follow the current trend of narrowing and narrowing the scope of the curriculum. Instead, I hope that the field will exert leadership in recognizing the importance of the arts in the development of the fully educated adult and, more important, for the purpose of identifying and leading the way in the nurturance of talented students in those realms. But, I do strongly agree with the irrationality of simply adding multiple dimensions of talent to the same service option—particularly when that service option is self-contained academic classes. The proposal that Robinson offered of multiple service options provides a more logical response. To seek alternative routes and alternative resources to serve students with those talents depends on a commitment to reaching out beyond the traditional conceptions of “a” gifted program, expanding notions of who teaches and who serves the gifted, and looking at resources as flexible, rather than as fixed and attached to one program.

Second, looking within the definition of intellectual ability and academic achievement, we can also raise questions about how current definitions have fared. There is no quarrel with data that affirm that traditional tests of intelligence and achievement do predict grades and traditional school success. To that end, the traditional definitions and traditional measures serve to characterize and identify one group of gifted students with a particular set of learning needs that were well defined by Robinson and should not be abandoned or ignored in a quest for alternatives. But should educators whose primary focus is the development of talent be satisfied with such a narrow conception of giftedness and such a narrow conception of success (i.e., grades, scores on achievement tests, or the narrow definition of classroom success that pervades current educational environments)? Is our sole purpose in providing educational programs for gifted students to promote only the traditional definitions of school success? Is the purpose of schooling for gifted students limited to the purposes of schooling for all students? To accept that premise is to ignore the data that suggest that adult giftedness is often not related to traditional school success. Unfortunately, the debates on these issues most often seem to lead us to accepting either/or conceptions of giftedness in schools. Either we promote only traditional academic giftedness and success, or we totally reject that view in favor of nontraditional definitions of giftedness and notions of the purposes of schooling. Would not a more

judicious approach recognize that there are students whose levels of knowledge, skills, and understanding—as traditionally defined and measured—exceed the level of instruction in their classrooms and suggest a need for special modifications to their program? And, at the same time, could we not recognize that there are students who may have the same ability to learn, but whose learning style or strengths, cultures, or environment have influenced them in ways that have resulted in manifestations of learning that do not fit the traditional mode? While traditional assessment tools do predict school success, is it possible that *both* the tool and the criterion are too narrowly conceived? Do our traditional measures predict success in narrow ranges of performance that should be reexamined and expanded?

The stranglehold that the traditional test paradigm has on the field of education stifles efforts to conceive of alternatives. For example, in attempting to publish an instrument measuring alternative conceptions of intelligence, Sternberg was rebuffed because the instrument did not correlate with existing measures. Yet, when students are assessed using these measures and the curriculum is designed around the areas of strength, students taught using a paradigm matching their strengths are more successful than those who are taught with a curriculum built on alternative strength areas (Sternberg, Ferrari, Clinkenbeard, & Grigorenko, 1996; Sternberg, Torff, & Grigorenko, 1998a, 1998b). It is quite conceivable that there are many more ways that students can achieve success than by those we traditionally measure and subsequently address with narrowly conceived curricula.

To be successful in the recognition of intellectual and academic talent in minority or poor children, using alternative definitions, such as those suggested by Sternberg (1985) and Gardner (1983, 1993), requires, first, a strong belief in the existence of academic talent in all populations and, second, that we seek indicators of academic talent that may be manifest in nontraditional forms and formats. But, as Robinson duly noted, we cannot resort to the use of measures that present little evidence of reliability or validity or that are not accompanied by careful documentation of their validity for predicting success in the curriculum that is presented. A cautionary word is in order regarding the complexity of the proposed alternatives. First, the use of the alternative instruments requires a reexamination of the curricula offered to students who have been identified when using those tools. If we continue to structure curricula around one symbol system (standard English) delivered primarily through only one medium (the written word), if we fail to

recognize and respond to the culture of the students who are so identified, and if we continue to measure success in only traditional ways, then we will succeed only in finding invalid instruments and guaranteeing failure for the students identified. The identification process and instrumentation present an enigma in many ways, as identified by Robinson. While existing tests may not be biased, if one uses only traditional outcome measures and if success is judged only by achievement in classrooms that are as culturally narrow as the predictor variables, then we will forever be locked in the current dilemma. The skills of "mature reasoning and problem solving . . . the ability to comprehend, connect, modify, and create complex ideas; the acuity in expressing ideas in multiple media; and going beyond the *givens*" (p. 259) are cross-disciplinary and extend way beyond traditional modes of learning and expression.

Hence, Robinson's assertion of the need to consider both ethnic and socioeconomic factors in our attempts to guarantee equity is critical. But we should not be too quick to attribute the issues of underidentification of minority students to poverty alone. While we all recognize the role that family and the situational environment plays in the cognitive development of the child, we have evidence that school plays a significant role in the development of the child, as well (National Research Council, 2002). Further, we have evidence that even in the middle-class African American group, something goes amiss (Miller, 2000; National Research Council, 2002), resulting in lower overall achievement of these students as compared to their Caucasian counterparts and that "Black students who enter school with the same test scores as the average White student learn less than the average White student between the 1st and 12th grades" (Phillips, Crouse, & Ralph, 1998). These anomalies suggest that factors beyond socioeconomic status must be considered. Perhaps we must consider the experiences of these children in school, as voiced by bell hooks (1994):

When we entered racist, desegregated, white schools we left a world where teachers believed that to educate black children would rightly require a political commitment. Now, we were mainly taught by white teachers whose lessons reinforced racist stereotypes. For black children, education was no longer about the practice of freedom. Realizing this, I lost my love of school. . . . The shift . . . to white schools where black students were always seen as interlopers, as not really belonging, taught me the difference between education as the practice of freedom and education that merely strives to reinforce domination. (pp. 3-4)

Do our schools continue to create environments that discourage the engagement and subsequent learning of some populations of students by attitudes, choice of instructional styles, choice of learning activities, or even curricular choice? A comment by an African American female senior suggests we do: "In twelve years of school, I never studied anything about myself" (American Association of University Women, 1992, p. 61).

The review of school environments by the Committee on Minority Representation in Special Education of the National Research Council affirms that there is little equity in school experiences across the nation—even within the same school district (National Research Council, 2002)—and that early school experiences are critical. Is it any wonder that the achievement level of this group of students is lower than that of their counterparts? If we continue to expect all gifted students to come to us from their families "certified" as gifted, we will continue to experience failure in our efforts to create gifted programs that are both equitable and excellent. Thus, the recommendation made by Robinson that we provide a broad range of early supportive and preparatory efforts are critical and should be extended to assuming responsibility for sharing our expertise in creating challenging, creative, problem-solving-oriented environments with classroom teachers from the preschool level on. The job of developing the talent of students from minority and impoverished environments cannot be left to chance or good will.

Further, as Robinson noted, we have responsibilities for reaching out to the parents and community of these students. We have evidence that early, multifaceted interventions can make a difference in long-term achievement of higher risk African American students (Campbell & Ramey, 1995) and also in the later identification of at-risk students as gifted (Callahan, Tomlinson, Moon, Tomchin, & Plucker, 1995). But we also must take care to guard against the subtle prejudices that may emerge from beliefs in the importance of family and family-support factors. There is no doubt, from the evidence presented by Robinson, that children from impoverished environments who have supportive families and those with greater resources are more likely to succeed. However, as a product of a very poor family that did not support education or see education as an avenue of success, but, rather, as a requirement of the government, I may be especially sensitive to the stereotyping that may result from overgeneralizations or from assuming that correlational data suggest cause and effect. Children can succeed without the traditional support of family. In our study of an intervention program with very young children, Project START, we found that creating a

team with the involvement of parents, teachers, and mentors provided a safety net for children when one of the triad failed to support the child's achievement (Callahan et al., 1995).

Finally, we need to ask an important resource question: Do all of the time, money, and energy invested in identification procedures substantially improve the educational practice in the field of gifted education? What if we were to invest just half of the resources spent on the identification of and the search for the "magic bullet" of identification into the development of teacher skills in presenting high-level, challenging, and appropriately engaging environments that capitalized on knowledge of cultural influences? We might attain more success in achieving the equity we seek.

The Self-Contained Classroom as a Dying Breed

The elimination of self-contained classrooms is posited by Robinson as a means of creating equity by removing from high visibility the services perceived as inequitable. It may be that we need to examine the way we implement this grouping option that leads to justifiable calls to eliminate it. Are there subtle, but significant, attitudes, practices, or behaviors that make self-contained classrooms easy targets when school officials seek to take an equity stance? Our first area of concern must be to ensure that the self-contained classroom is not the "country club of the school district" whose membership reflects "ability to pay," rather than an assessment of student knowledge, skills, and understandings. Does the identification of giftedness reflect more opportunities to learn and privilege that give advantaged students entry and bars the doors forevermore to others because "they could never catch up"? More important, we must ensure that the curriculum and instruction provided within those classrooms are appropriately challenging and responsive to student learning needs and potential. Too often the learning activities offered in the name of the gifted program in a self-contained classroom fail to represent an opportunity to bring a unique curriculum to a qualified group of scholars. To use the criteria of Harry Passow, do the learning opportunities in the self-contained classroom represent instructional activities that other students couldn't, wouldn't, and shouldn't do? And are those questions answered with consideration of what other students could do with appropriate scaffolding and support? If not, self-contained classrooms are little more than networking opportunities from which minority and poor students have been excluded.

We must also find ways to make those classes less like “closed shops” or to avoid having them identified as the “real gifted program,” even as other services are substandard or nonexistent. While there may be gifted students who perform at high levels across all academic disciplines, there are other gifted students whose excellence in one domain exceeds the highest performance of all those who are identified across disciplines. Those students should be given access to the highest level of challenge in that arena. Too often, failure to be excellent at everything leads to the alternative of no service when self-contained classrooms are perceived as the *real* or only service provided. I would place the highest priority on ensuring that special classes are only one option in a smorgasbord of options designed to meet the varying needs of diverse groups of students who show academic promise. I would then add that those options must all be of high quality.

Second, educators have failed to document the educational benefits of self-contained classrooms in the local setting. While there is limited data on the effectiveness of that particular grouping option (Delcourt, Loyd, Cornell, & Goldberg, 1994), the data suggest variability in effectiveness, depending on quality of implementation. Local school districts are woefully remiss in failing to demonstrate that this grouping option makes a difference in their communities—other than providing privilege. While students in those classes generally earn higher test scores and go on in greater numbers to Advanced Placement courses and college, there is seldom evidence that they do so in greater proportion than those students who are qualified, but do not elect to participate.

A Final Thought

As Robinson has implied in her article, those who govern and work within the educational system are not clear or consistent in definitions of excellence or equity. Too often, in fact, there are competing philosophies within the same context that tear at the fabric of the system, with the result that neither excellence nor equity is served or achieved. Do educators and politicians believe the goal is for all children to become all that they are capable of being? Or do they believe all children should have equal access to all learning? Or do they simply want to ensure that no child is left behind? The answer to all these questions is usually an unqualified *yes* to all, with little regard to the ways in which these philosophies may conflict and with no regard for finding ways to integrate these philosophies in a

way that leads to quality educational experiences for all children. Combine competing philosophies with diminished resources, with teachers who are poorly prepared to address the wide range of diversity in their classrooms, and with a search for simplistic answers, and we are faced with the dilemmas that Robinson has identified.

Given all of these concerns and issues, I would reiterate the call for a renewed effort to address seriously the recommendations offered by Robinson—from those that are within our individual or institutional control to those that require our societal commitment to continue to wage the war on poverty. I am often confronted with the question “What can schools really be expected to accomplish in the face of the social and environmental handicaps that poverty, limited English proficiency, and minority status present every day to such a significant proportion of our population?” I contend that we must continue to confront the overt discrimination and the more subversive biases and hard-to-counter covert racism and social elitism in our country. As long as any educators harbor beliefs about the capacity of children based on color or socioeconomic status, we will continue to see inequities and desperate, well-intentioned, but ill-conceived, actions to counter inequity.

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