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Multi-level selective classes for gifted students

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Research was undertaken to examine the level of support and general attitudes towards multi-level selective classes for gifted students amongst the staff and parents of an independent (non-government) boys' Preparatory school, located in Adelaide, South Australia. Questionnaires were sent to all parents and staff in the Preparatory school and approximately 50 per cent chose to participate, which equated to 90 parents and 14 staff. The responses received reflected the range of attitudes noted in the literature. This article examines some of these attitudes in the light of the research on grouping for gifted students, and evaluates the benefits and disadvantages that parents and staff expressed about the multi-level selective classes at the school in question. A general overview of current provisions within South Australia for gifted students, and findings from the Senate Employment, Workplace Relations, Small Business and Education References Committee report into the Education of gifted children in Australia (The Senate Committee, 2001) puts this provision into context.

Ability grouping, selective classes, multi-level classes, attitudes to gifted education programs

INTRODUCTION

The education system in South Australia is one that groups all children of the same age together in classrooms and presents learning experiences that are designed to progress those children through a curriculum, achieving certain standards and culminating in the award of the South Australian Certificate of Education after 12 or 13 years of schooling.

Schools are places of learning. There are few who dispute the role of the school in nurturing and developing ability. The Senate Committee (2001, p.35) stated

> Above all, the duty to help all children reach their potential is a moral imperative. We should not ask children to come to school to waste their time. Equity should be viewed as equal access to an appropriate education.

Children of the same chronological age differ from each other in all sorts of ways, including academic ability. This presents a great challenge to teachers who are faced with groups of diverse learners with a wide range of academic ability and other needs, and whose task is to facilitate each student's development by providing a range of educational provisions appropriate to their diverse needs.

Gifted students are found in all classrooms. Estimates of the incidence of giftedness vary, but if measured by a threshold IQ of 125, can be approximated to 10 per cent of the total population (Gagne, 2003). Within this general group of gifted individuals, it is important to remember that a range of profiles and defining characteristics are identifiable, and many of these differences from the norm become more apparent the higher the degree of giftedness. While the literature presents a range of definitions of giftedness, the researchers in the field agree that gifted students require qualitatively different educational experiences in order to achieve positive intellectual, social and emotional development (Braggett, 1997; Van Tassel Baska, 1994; Tomlinson, 1995). The current

South Australian policy for gifted students (DECS, 1995 in DECS, 1996) highlights the importance of special provisions in the development of giftedness, stating that:

> Appropriate intervention by the family, community, schools and Children's Services can help a gifted student to reach full potential.

In terms of what schools should provide in terms of 'appropriate intervention', Feldhusen (1989, p.10) concludes from his research that:

> Gifted and talented youth need accelerated, challenging instruction in core subject areas that parallel their special talents or aptitudes. They need opportunities to work with other gifted and talented youth. And they need…teachers who both understand the nature and needs of gifted youth and are deeply knowledgeable of the content they teach.

The most important responsibility schools have for gifted students is to provide them with educational opportunities equal to their unique needs such that their academic development is commensurate with their natural ability, and their healthy social and emotional development is facilitated.

What sounds reasonable in theory is often fraught with problems in practice. For a start, many myths about giftedness are prevalent and present obstacles to appropriate provision. For instance, a commonly held belief (that is discredited by research) is that gifted students will be successful regardless of the quality of their education. GERRIC's submission to The Senate Committee (2001, p.15) put forward the following argument:

> The catch-cries of 'talent will out' and 'the cream will rise to the top' derive from the assumption that all students of high ability will succeed, and that therefore those who do succeed (and are therefore most easily identifiable as gifted or talented) represent the full quota of those who have potential. Like most simplistic arguments, it is extremely seductive; however it is contradicted by the many studies of underachievement and serious demotivation among academically gifted children and adolescents.

Because of this belief that the gifted will succeed regardless, some parents are resentful of extra resource allocation for gifted programs that are seen to favour a few students, and some teachers assert that their time and efforts are better invested in assisting the lower ability students rather than the high ability students. What they fail to understand is that the gifted students, as different from the norm as the low ability students, are equally to be considered to be 'special needs' students. As The Senate Committee (2001:34) found, "special needs (giftedness) should be seen in the same light as special needs (intellectual disabilities) or special needs (physical disabilities)".

In some classrooms, the gifted students may be used as peer mentors to help teach the less able students in the class, rather than having their own learning extended. Winebrenner (1993, p.1) stated that:

> In a class that has a range of abilities…it is the most able, rather than the least able, who will learn less new material than any other group.

While in South Australia the policy of inclusion means that the composition of classes is inclusive of a wide range of needs and abilities, it is debatable whether all teachers have been equipped with the requisite special education knowledge and skills to cater appropriately for a range of children with special needs, or even whether the task is achievable in classes of up to 30 or more children.

Teachers need pre-service and in-service training in gifted education in order to understand, identify and provide appropriately for gifted students. The Senate Committee (2001, p.79) noted that "teacher training [in gifted education] is fundamental, and is not being done well enough at present". Many teachers lack the understanding of and strategies associated with gifted education, so are poorly prepared to cater for the gifted learners in their classroom. Without this training, teachers often equate giftedness with high achievement, and fail to cater for the gifted learner who, when presented with work that they have already mastered, or find too easy, or boring, may not engage with the work and thus do not achieve at a level which the teacher expects of a high ability student. Thus the gifted learner may be overlooked for any special provisions.

In addition, schools differ, not just in the leadership they provide for gifted education within their school, but also in the nature of the provisions put in place, that are designed to meet the needs of their gifted students. While all schools should have a range of provisions including acceleration, extension and enrichment for gifted students, prioritizing resource allocation is always difficult. Some schools may provide a pull-out program for an hour or two each week, or an extension group out of school hours for those identified as being gifted. In South Australia, most gifted students are taught within the regular classroom. Some schools use cluster grouping of several gifted students placed together within the regular classroom.

An alternative provision is to group the gifted students into selective classes for all or most of their school day. This is the principle behind the IGNITE program currently operating in three of our state's government secondary schools, and is applied in this independent boys' Preparatory School. Within this context, the remainder of this article addresses the provision of selective multi-level classes for gifted students, and discusses the attitudes expressed by staff and parents about their experience at this school.

MULTI-LEVEL SELECTIVE CLASSES

With about 380 boys, this school has offered two multi-level selective classes for gifted students since 2003 – one which combines the middle years of primary school (Years 3, 4 and 5) and the other which combines Years 6 and 7, each of which has about 24 students. Straight year level classes operate concurrently, and students who are identified as being gifted may choose to be placed in the multi-level class or remain in the straight year-level class. The gifted students who choose to remain in the year-level classes, and those in the junior primary years are supported with a weekly pull-out program which has a social and emotional focus.

The concept of mental age rather than chronological age is an important idea when considering multi-level classes. This means that students of differing ages but all with high intellectual ability work together, so-called 'like minds' together generating a relatively homogenous academic group.

In the current research study, of the 50 per cent of staff and parents who responded, roughly 70 per cent were supportive and 30 per cent were not supportive of the multi-level classes for gifted students. The parents of gifted children in the multi-level classes were unanimous in their praise for the classes. At both ends of the spectrum, there were strongly expressed attitudes, either praising or criticizing the arrangements. The 50 per cent who did not choose to respond may be neutral about the issue, but for whatever reason, were not motivated to either praise or criticize the arrangements.

Perceived Benefits of the Multi-Level Classes

Grouping gifted students in selective classes can provide them with the opportunity to work at a faster pace, with more rigorous and challenging curriculum better suited to their intellectual ability. The academic advantages both parents and teachers at this school observed were

extremely positive, including the benefits of extension, faster-paced learning and creative and challenging curriculum. In terms of academic achievement, Allan (1991, p.63) cites Kulik and Kulik's (1989) analysis of gifted and talented programs which "found that students in gifted and talented classes performed significantly better than they did in heterogeneous classes". Rogers (1991) also concluded that:

> While full-time ability grouping for regular instruction makes no discernible difference in the academic achievement of average and low-ability students, it does produce substantial academic gains for gifted students enrolled full-time in special programs for the gifted and talented.

The reason for this is that in a homogenous grouping, more appropriate learning experiences can be provided. According to a meta-analysis of the research into ability grouping, Rogers (1998) found that:

> High-ability and gifted students tend to benefit most from like-ability grouping, because the strategy provides them with the opportunity to access more advanced knowledge and skills and to practice deeper processing. Most likely, this access can be provided when instructors are not forced to divide their teaching energies and efforts among widely diverse levels of ability and achievement.

Grouping gifted students in homogeneous classes also has the advantage of being better able to meet their social and emotional needs. Gifted children differ from their age-peers emotionally as well as intellectually. Often it is their sense of feeling different that can make gifted students vulnerable to negative social and emotional development. As Silverman (1993, p.3) states, "Gifted children not only ***think*** differently from their peers, they also ***feel*** differently." This sense of difference is amplified the higher the degree of giftedness. Gross (2000, p.188) found that:

> The problems of social isolation, peer rejection, loneliness and alienation which afflict many extremely gifted children arise not out of their exceptional intellectual abilities but as a result of society's response to them.

Because of this, they need opportunities to be with other gifted students who are like-minded peers, and not necessarily age-peers, who understand their feelings and perceptions and with whom they can feel 'normal' and accepted.

Rogers' (1998) research found that all children, not just gifted children, benefited from being grouped with other children of like ability. The opportunity to work and socialize with other like-minded students minimized the sense of 'difference' and isolation that gifted students often experience when placed in regular classrooms. Many parent responses in this current study acknowledged that their gifted children enjoyed and needed the company of like-minded boys, had formed good friendships within the class (irrespective of age differences) and were socially happy and more confident, "not being teased or called 'weird' by their classmates anymore". Allan (1991, p.63) analysed Kulik & Kulik (1982) and Kulik's (1985) research on ability grouping for gifted students and concluded that their impact on issues of attitude and self-concept were "generally positive".

In support of the classes, several parents in this current study expressed relief at finding a school that met their child's needs, such as the following from the parent of a Year 5 child who wrote:

> We have spent five years battling an education system that has been unable to effectively cater for our highly gifted son, trying to find the right educational fit for him…I cannot remember seeing as much joy in my son's face at the end of his first day at [this school].

Perceived Disadvantages of the Multi-Level Classes

The most frequently mentioned disadvantage parents saw in having multi-level classes related to the gifted boys being isolated from their age peers, and the boys in the year-level classes finding it hard to maintain friendships with their age peers in the multi-level classes. Both these issues could arise simply by friends being physically separated and placed in different classrooms and were not necessarily concerned with the nature of those classrooms. One of the most common reasons why parents generally are reluctant to accelerate their gifted child is their perception that children need to stay in a class with their age peers (Colangelo, Assouline & Gross, 2004) and yet friendships are based on many factors other than age, such as common interests and shared aspirations. Class placement decisions should be made on the basis of which class best will meet the child's academic needs, while supporting their social and emotional development.

While one teacher saw no disadvantages in having multi-level classes for gifted students, three teachers echoed the parents' concerns about boys being separated from their year level peers, but most teachers saw the disadvantages as being for the students in the year-level classes when the bright students were removed. Their criticisms centred around two main issues: the perception of decreased self-esteem of the boys not selected, and the loss of academic role models for the less able students in the year-level classes.

Interestingly, Allan's (1991) research on the effects of ability grouping on self-esteem found that the positive effect on self-esteem was more significant in homogenous groups of slower learners, who experienced feelings of success and competency when in a classroom of students more similar to themselves and without the brightest students to make them feel incompetent. Students who previously were overshadowed by the brightest students are empowered, their abilities stand out in different ways and they take on leadership roles in the class when the gifted students were removed (Kennedy, 1989; Fiedler et al, 1992 in Allan, 1991). Perhaps other variables, such as an individual student's competitive nature and perception of the selection process as a form of competition, could account for a loss of self-esteem.

With respect to role models, Schunk's (1987) research found that children modelled themselves on other children with whom they could identify as being roughly similar to them and who were successful in valued tasks. According to Schunk, gifted students did not provide academic role models for average or low-ability students because of the perception of difference. This highlighted the importance of basing decisions about provisions for gifted students on reliable research rather than on limited personal values and experience. If a teacher embraced the opportunity to teach a class with a narrower range of ability and valued provisions which were designed to maximise educational outcomes for the whole spectrum of diverse learners, rather than lamenting the loss of bright students in the class, then their positive modelling would help all students to see the benefits to be accrued in these classroom arrangements.

One parent of a Year 6 child (who was not identified as being gifted) wrote: *my perception is the brighter you are, the more help you get, which is quite disturbing.*

Another Year 6 parent, whose child had not been identified as being gifted, wrote that:

> I feel more remote from the so-called [school] community, I no longer want to be a class rep, attend school events and try to be part of the school community that engenders a philosophy of intellectual elitism.

This is a very negative response, and in the context of the general parent responses, this sentiment was voiced by only one parent. However, it is interesting to note that the same sense of isolation and disengagement is often reported from parents of gifted children in school communities which neither recognized nor valued gifted students, as reported by the Gifted and Talented Children's Association of Western Australia (2001, in The Senate Committee, 2001, p.29) stating that:

> Many [parents]…find that public perception of the term 'gifted' means that the children and parents are ostracized, seen as 'having tickets on themselves', and parents are seen as 'pushy' parents who have 'hot housed' their children.

What both groups of parents were experiencing was a sense of difference and alienation from the culture prevalent in their school community. If parents - mature adults - were sensitive to and upset by this sense of 'lack of fit', it raises the question of what children must feel when they perceive that they are different from their peers. The parameters of this research did not include asking the students themselves about their impressions of class provisions, but this could be explored in a follow-up study. Shields' (1995) research comparing students' attitudes and perceptions in homogenous and heterogeneous classrooms found that there was no evidence to suggest that ability grouping impacted negatively on either students' self concept or attitudes.

Three parents in this study observed that the segregation of students into the multi-level classes and the associated charges of elitism levelled against such provision led to unrest and division within the school community. Several of the staff also perceived the provision of special classes to be elitist and one teacher observed that it was divisive of the school community. Such a small number of responses to this effect would suggest that the school community was *not* divided over this issue, but a few people within the community felt isolated. Communication is essential in maintaining harmony within a community, and one parent highlighted the importance of this, saying that there were no disadvantages in having the multi-level classes in the school:

> As long as all parents in the school are educated in why [the multi-level classes] are necessary and are not elitist or singling out one group of boys as better than the others.

The observation that special provisions for gifted students are elitist is commonly reported in the literature and in submissions made to The Senate Committee Inquiry into the education of gifted children (2001:30). Elitist attitudes could certainly be very divisive, polarizing people into a 'them' and 'us' mentality (Elliott, 1968 in Stewart et al, 2003). A strong argument against elitism is equity and social justice. A child who is gifted needs qualitatively different educational provisions, just as the child who is a brilliant musician needs advanced tuition in music, and the child who is an outstanding athlete needs to be given opportunities to train and compete with other elite athletes. Each child's needs are important and valued. The Senate Committee (2001, p.32) recommended that:

> It is essential to disconnect 'high intellectual ability' from the unwanted connotation of general moral superiority. High intellectual ability, like high sporting ability, is simply one of many morally neutral ways in which individuals can differ from each other.

One parent of a Year 7 student in the multi-age class wrote that:

> Every child has a talent – you just have to find it and cater for it. Parents [of boys not identified as being intellectually gifted] may need to look at their children and see their talents lie elsewhere, for example the 'A' grade football team, and be happy that their child is gifted at sport but may not have the IQ to be placed in a multi-level class, just as my child does not have the skill to be placed in the 'A' grade football team.

Changing negative attitudes towards giftedness is an important precursor to providing the necessary educational experiences in an atmosphere of recognition and acceptance.

CONCLUSIONS

Grouping is only a starting point for meeting the needs of the gifted students. The significant element is the provisions that are developed for the students once they are in the group. Full-time

ability grouping on its own does not produce any increases in academic achievement, nor necessarily any benefits to social and emotional development (Kulik & Kulik, 1992; Rogers, 1993). It is only when the provision of a differentiated curriculum and the quality of the instruction and learning environment within the grouped classroom matches the needs of the gifted students that significant benefits are achieved. Gross (1997, p. 21) stated that:

> A program which allows academically gifted students to undertake a fast-paced, intellectually rigorous curriculum matched to their abilities and interests, in company with other students of similar abilities, provides what Robinson and Robinson (1982) termed the 'optimal match' between gifted students, the curriculum developed for them, and the environment in which their talents are being fostered. A program of fulltime grouping…meets Gagne's (1993) criteria for content, setting and density, and is the optimal environment for academically gifted children (Van Tassel-Baska, 1985).

The attitudes and values expressed by the parents and staff surveyed at this school mirror many of the findings in the research literature. The majority of responses favour the multi-level class provision for gifted students, and the parents of boys in the multi-level classes are unanimously supportive of the classes and the programs they offer because of the positive outcomes their children experience.

The Senate Enquiry Committee (2001, p.66) "accept[ed] the predominant evidence that ability grouping is beneficial for the outcomes of gifted children" and recommendation 7 of their report stated that:

> MCEETYA [the Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs] should develop a consistent policy exploring the options for ability grouping and supporting ability grouping as a way of meeting the needs of the gifted.

With provisions put in place for gifted students that are soundly based on well-researched theories and practices, and implemented by trained and effective teachers, gifted students are given every opportunity to be successful, the rest of the students are not disadvantaged – in fact, all learners are given educational opportunities more equal to their needs.

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