

The Bermuda Triangle of Gifted Education

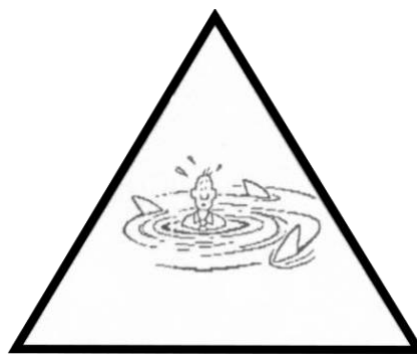
Joseph S. Renzulli
The University of Connecticut

For the first time in more than a decade I find it necessary to begin this column on a somewhat pessimistic note! Programs for the gifted and talented are experiencing serious setbacks all over the country because of the general slow down in the economy and three new factors which may pose even more formidable threats to the services provided for students of high potential. Economic factors have always influenced gifted education, but we have survived previous recessions because the rationale underlying special programs remained strong even in the face of economic hard times. But this rationale is now being challenged by a number of factors that I will collectively refer to as “The Reform Movement.” Reforming and restructuring general education are obviously important concerns for everyone, however, some of the proposals being put forth are nothing short of devastating for our most potentially able learners.

The three factors represented in the diagram are operating like the vertices of a hazardous triangle, each one interacting with the others, to create a dangerous abyss into which many special programs are descending and disappearing. The elimination of grouping is being proposed by policy makers as yet another desperate attempt to overcome declining scores, and to provide educational equity at the expense of educational challenge and excellence. The anti-grouping advocates are inclined to say that “the research” supports their position, however, quite the opposite is true when it comes to high ability students. [Note: See below for sources that you can use to combat these misinterpretations of research findings.] Another strategy being used to eliminate grouping is to make reference to the Carnegie Report and the recent report produced by the National Governors’ Association. This report lists the following as one of its national goals: “Challenge educators to eliminate ability grouping and tracking.” This headline item is currently receiving front page attention in both the national press and professional literature, but within the context of the same report the following disclaimer appears: *“Eliminating these practices [i.e., grouping] does not require ending special opportunities for students, such as the gifted and talented or Advanced Placement courses.”* The problem, of course, is that decision

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The Elimination of Grouping



The Dumbing Down
of Curriculum

Mastery Learning and
Cooperative Learning Models

makers might not “read the small print,” and therefore the sweeping generalization of doing away with grouping may take its toll on the gifted program.

The second vertex of the triangle is the well documented fact that the general curriculum has been “dumbed down” by as much as two grade levels in most textbooks. We have written extensively about the dumbing down of curriculum as part of the rationale underlying curriculum compacting, but perhaps the following example of two mathematics problems reported by a research scientist helps to make the point in a somewhat more practical way:

1. Five girls and three boys reached the top of Hurricane Mountain. How many children reached the top of the mountain together?
2. Mark, Theo, and Jack are brothers. Theo was born second. Mark is the youngest Who is the oldest?

In an unscientific survey, I passed these problems to 15 children, all under 8 years old; two were kindergartners. To no one’s surprise, they solved them handily.

These problems, however, did not come from 1st- or 2nd-grade textbooks; they appeared in a mathematics textbook for fifth graders in one of the most prestigious public schools in California ... I was saddened to discover that what is taught to 14 year olds in the Netherlands and Indonesia—the solution of quadratic equations—was given at the college level here ... In Taiwan, a 5th-grader has already started studying motion problems (“At what time will the two cars meet?”). In the Dutch system, multiplication and division are considered finished by the third grade level. When I took a peek at a Japanese 5th-grade level math book, I felt sad, embarrassed, and outraged. Who made the decision that our 5th-graders, even in classes for the gifted, are not qualified to learn elementary algebra (negative numbers and first degree equations) and geometry (Pythagorean theorem) like their counterparts in Asia?

I shudder to think that if this is happening in schools that are nationally ranked in the 90th percentile, what is being taught to our children in the inner cities?

The third vertex of the triangle is the emphasis that the reform movement is placing on mastery learning models and substitutions for special programs such as cooperative learning. Mastery learning, sometimes referred to as unified curricular objectives, core curriculum, or curricular alignment, was originally designed to provide a highly structured approach to overcoming learning deficits in at risk students. Although flexible progress through structured material is possible, and even recommended by proponents of mastery learning, the reality is that mastery learning is usually applied in a rigorous lock-step fashion. Whole group teaching, prescribed and didactic instruction, and an emphasis on test driven standardized curriculum and minimum competence have become yet another strategy for trying to improve the achievement test scores that frequently are published on the front pages of the states’ leading newspapers. The learning rates of high ability students are being retarded by such methods, and even at

risk students are dropping out of school at unprecedented rates because of the boredom inherent in such methods. When classrooms are turned into dreary places that devote most of their time to rote practice and repetitious worksheets, and when the curriculum is dumbed down to lower and lower levels of challenge, is it any wonder that at risk students are becoming more disaffected, that their scores continue to decline and the dropout rates continue to rise? If the diagnostic-perspective approach inherent in mastery learning hasn't produced any noticeable results, should we not give enrichment teaching a chance to accomplish the goals for at risk students that have thus far eluded us?

The newest panacea in town is cooperative learning. Although no one would argue with the importance of developing all forms of cooperativeness in young people, the cooperative learning models generally prevent high potential students from engaging in the kinds of academic challenges that result from interaction with equally able peers. Advanced classes are being eliminated, especially at the middle school level, and teachers are being told that cooperative learning will take care of the individual needs of all students. The research on cooperative learning has reported benefits in connection with some of the social goals of education, and there is some data that shows that lower achieving students benefit from this approach to learning. But there is not one shred of evidence to show that cooperative learning improves the achievement of gifted and talented students. On the contrary, every reaction to cooperative learning that has been brought to our attention by teachers and parents of high ability students clearly and unequivocally indicates that these students are being held back by this model of teaching.

Each vertex of the triangle, singly and in combination, has had a seductive influence on policy makers, many of whom are nothing short of desperate to overcome criticism about general educational shortcomings. There is almost a national obsession to "get-the-scores-up," even if the means to do this result in a drag down effect on the achievement of gifted students. When we add together the influences that these three aspects of the reform movement, there is indeed a dangerous abyss that can be compared to the destructive power of the Bermuda Triangle.

Bolstering Up Our Defenses

Programs for the gifted are dropping like flies around the country, and special program teachers are being turned into traveling consultants, offering quick-fix thinking skill activities in one classroom after another. They have been told to give up the more intensive kinds of services they offer to targeted groups in favor of general enrichment activities for everyone. In some cases, the Schoolwide Enrichment Model is being offered as a rationale for this change in roles. Clearly, such practices are *not* the intention of our model. We believe that *classroom teachers* should be providing both curriculum compacting and Types I and II Enrichment as part of a total school approach for improving the education of all students; and we have recommended that special program teachers assist in this process by sharing some of the technology of gifted education with the general faculty through the establishment of schoolwide enrichment teams.

This recommendation is even more relevant for schools that serve at-risk students because it is in these schools that the “drill and kill” of mastery learning is being emphasized. But we steadfastly maintain that a program for the development of giftedness must have an identified talent pool, and that the majority of the special program teacher’s time must be spent working directly with these students. To be certain, school wide enrichment does allow for more flexibility in selecting the talent pool, and it does encourage more general enrichment in regular classrooms. And in those cases when regular classroom enrichment produces remarkably positive reactions on the parts of certain students, we further recommend that these students have access to some of the special program’s resources.

This process, which we sometimes refer to as performance based identification, serves as a safety valve in our model. Even the most flexible methods for identifying talent pool students will inevitably overlook a small number of students who might be capable of outstanding Type III's in certain areas of intense interest and task commitment.

One of the ways in which you can bolster your defenses against the kinds of situations described above is to reexamine your overall programming model and make certain that there are some "non-negotiables" so far as rigorous student productivity is concerned. Highlight previous Type III's and make certain that a large amount of your energy is being devoted to this aspect of the model. The best advocacy for gifted programming is the program itself, however, we must do everything in our power to show unequivocally that the kinds of student products cannot and do not ordinarily take place in regular classrooms.

If you have not started enrichment teams in your school(s), take immediate steps to get this component in place. Share with teachers the kinds of Type II activities that can easily be integrated into regular classroom work and encourage them to share activities in this category with one another.

Sally and I have recently completed a paper entitled “The Reform Movement and the Quiet Crisis in Gifted Education.” This paper contains more detailed discussion of the points covered above, and we will be happy to send you a copy if you will send us a stamped self-addressed 9x12 envelope with \$.75 postage placed on it. Mark the envelope “Reform Movement Paper” in the lower left-hand corner.

Our National Research Center on the Gifted and Talented has recently commissioned a paper on the affects of ability grouping that will be presented by Dr. Karen B. Rogers. Karen has done a tremendous amount of work on this topic and her paper provides compelling data about some of the misinterpretations that are being made on the ability grouping issue. The paper will be completed in early January and once again, we will be happy to provide you with a copy if you send a self-addressed stamped envelope (same size and postage indicated above). Mark the lower left-hand corner “Research Synthesis on the Affects of Ability Grouping.”

Another article you should obtain is a commentary on cooperative learning by Dr. Ann Robinson that appeared in Fall, 1990 issue of *Journal for the Education of the Gifted* (Vol. 14, No. 1, pp. 9–27). This article makes a strong case for the dangers that may be inherent for high ability students in the cooperative learning model.