

## **POINT-COUNTERPOINT**

### **The Positive Side of Pull-Out Programs**

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Before making a case for the advantages of pull-out programs, I would like to establish the parameters of that which I am defending. These parameters are fourfold, and I will discuss each one briefly, in an effort to set the stage for the main thesis of this paper.

First and foremost, I would like to point out the well recognized difference between administrative and theoretical models. Administrative models consist of organizational patterns and procedures for dealing with such issues as how we group students, develop schedules for teacher and student time allocations to special services, and arrange for the delivery of services. Theoretical models, on the other hand, consist of principles that guide the instructional process and give direction to the content, thinking skills, instructional strategies, and outcomes of learning experiences that might take place within the context of any given administrative pattern of organization. Theoretical models are influential in determining the quality of special program experiences, whereas administrative models are more concerned with the efficiency or smoothness with which special programs operate.

Pull-out programs clearly fall into the category of administrative models, and therefore must be judged by comparing them with other organizational arrangements that fall into this category. I have seen good and bad pull-out programs, just as I have seen good and bad special classes, Saturday programs, etc. The point is that the quality of any given organizational pattern is a function of many things, the least important of which is the way that we arrange bright students in groups or the ways that we move them around. Regardless of the theoretical model underlying pull-out programs, they should have certain characteristics that relate to their overall organizational dimensions. They should involve more than a minimal time commitment; they should reflect interaction with classroom teachers and the regular curriculum; they should be more than a random collection of fun and games activities or process training skills; and they should be based mainly on differentiated teaching methods and materials that reflect both horizontal enrichment and vertical acceleration.

A second parameter is concerned with the grade levels at which special programs operate. The argument that follows is restricted to elementary school programs in which students are regularly scheduled in self-contained classes for the majority of their school day. I do not believe that pull-out programs are as effective at the secondary level, nor do I view pull-out programs as competing with services that are supplementary to programs conducted during the regular school day. Supplementary programs such as Saturday classes and summer schools are considered to be worthwhile adjuncts to a special program that is a totally integrated part of the regular school

schedule. I do not view these adjunct programs as vehicles that compete with pull-out programs, and doubt that anyone would recommend that we do nothing for high potential youth during the regular school week because we planned on meeting their needs after school on Saturdays or next summer!

A third parameter relates to my own orientation about the relationship between pull-out programs and the regular curriculum. I have been a strong advocate of enrichment programs, but I have been equally adamant in my argument for systematic daily modifications in the regular curriculum and classroom through a process called Curriculum Compacting (Renzulli, Smith, & Reis, 1982). It makes little sense to identify youngsters because they have superior academic potential, and then ignore such abilities in the regular classroom where these youngsters spend the major proportion of their time. This two pronged approach of compacting plus enrichment through a pull-out program is the basis for the academic freedom argument that will be advanced below.

The fourth parameter relates to a personal bias, but one which I believe all educators of the gifted must consider. Gifted programs have never been popular for any significant period of time, the main reason being that the gifted establishment has traditionally advocated programs that foster elitism through the total separation of students. Such approaches totally ignore the quality of general education and the kinds of improvements that the technology of gifted education can bring about in the overall improvement of our schools. A rising tide lifts all ships, and I think it can safely be said that you usually do not find great gifted programs in poor schools. My bias is that special programs can serve a remarkably uplifting function for general education.

Our best and brightest students will fare far better in an atmosphere in which a premium is placed on excellence at all levels of schooling. In our *Schoolwide Enrichment Model* (Renzulli and Reis, 1985), we have advocated a new role for gifted specialists that encourages the sharing of those aspects of gifted technology that will benefit other youngsters and other members of the school faculty. We have looked for ways to draw in and involve all faculty persons who can assist bright youngsters in various ways. We believe that such involvement will both improve program quality *and* break down some of the barriers that traditionally have caused gifted programs to be relatively short entities in the overall history of American education. As will be pointed out below, I believe that pull-out programs are one of the most effective vehicles for encouraging expanded faculty involvement; and therefore, this consideration is raised as one of the underlying parameters of my position.

Finally, in the sections that follow I will purposefully avoid playing the "research says ..." game because there is no comprehensive study in existence that has compared various administrative patterns of organization under controlled conditions. Acceleration advocates have studied acceleration, and not surprisingly, reported positive benefits. And enrichment advocates have done likewise. But causal comparative studies are totally absent in the literature, and questionnaire studies based solely on subjective opinion have failed to meet minimum requirements for sampling and appropriate research methodology.

## Academic Freedom vs. the Sword of Damocles

One of the strongest arguments for a pull-out program is that it provides a place for radical departures from the regular curriculum. Resource teachers in pull-out programs are literally free agents in the types of services and experiences that they might provide for highly able students. If we think for a moment about the total school experience that most of us have pursued, from preschool to graduate school, it is safe to conclude that the vast majority of these experiences have been predetermined and prescribed by curriculum guides, courses of study, and textbook outlines. And we are presently experiencing a standardized, state level, test-driven curriculum that is unprecedented in the history of education. Most of what is taught in regular classrooms and full-time special classes for the gifted has been determined by someone other than the teacher, and usually has little or no input from the students. The material to be covered is laid out in page, chapter, and verse fashion; and any enrichment that might be provided is almost always an extension of the prescribed and predetermined curriculum. A casual examination of the so-called enrichment sections of standard texts or teacher's guides will quickly reveal that most of the recommended material is clearly a more of-the-same variety—endless practice of already covered skills. When content coverage is the predominant theme (and this seems to be the pattern in even the best schools, according to Goodlad's recent report), where do we find room for the development of individual interests, opportunities to explore various approaches to learning and thinking styles, and the freedom to develop self-directed learning skills?

My own experience has shown that when a teacher is responsible for covering both the regular curriculum and, at the same time, providing experiences designed to challenge superior abilities, four common constraints are almost always placed upon teaching situations. First, the regular curriculum predominates, and the advanced experiences are often a more-of-the-same variety. Second, the teacher is placed in the awkward position of wearing two hats, and sometimes these hats put the teacher in conflicting roles. He or she must be task master of the required regular curriculum most of the time, and at other times she or he must attempt to cast-off this role in an effort to deal with learning on a more personalized and individual level. Third, the teacher is almost always caught up in the grading process, and must deal regularly with traditional practices such as tests, report cards, and the usual kinds of course evaluation procedures. Finally, and most important, the prescribed curriculum almost always results in a predominant mode of whole group teaching. Students are taken in lock step fashion through the material with little or no opportunity for individual acceleration or individual horizontal digressions from whole group activities. When a predetermined and prescribed curriculum is hanging over our heads like the sword of Damocles, we usually make the fatal error of treating an entire group of bright youngsters as if they are a homogeneous group. In actuality, they are probably more different from one another than a typical classroom of heterogeneously grouped students.

Resource teachers in pull-out programs are generally free from the constraints listed above. They are free to make choices about what will be covered, how it will be covered, and which students may choose to participate in various kinds of program activities. Although some whole group teaching undoubtedly is required, resource rooms are remarkable islands of academic freedom where we can truly respect individual abilities, interests, and learning styles.

Cluster grouping based on interests, cross-age grouping, the involvement of other faculty members and community resources, and a general atmosphere of flexibility almost always characterize resource rooms that do not have the regular curriculum hanging over their heads. And although evaluation and feedback are always a part of the teaching process, resource room teachers are generally free from the traditional educational practice of grading. Such freedom allows teachers the opportunity to develop a differentiated relationship with students than those teachers who must eventually boil everything down to a number or a letter that will fit in a report card box.

This academic freedom has its greatest power in the kinds of creative productivity that emerges when teachers and students are freed from the constraints of the regular curriculum. Freedom of any kind, however, always carries with it requirements for both responsibility and accountability. If we are to develop defensible pull-out programs (or any other type of administrative model), then it is nothing short of essential that such programs be based on theoretical models that are characterized by the highest kinds of academic and artistic rigor. By "rigor" I mean experiences that clearly reflect advanced level content and concepts, authentic modes of inquiry and investigative techniques, sustained and challenging practice, advanced level print and non-print resources, and the kinds of constructively critical feedback that cause students to engage willingly and zestfully in the escalation of thinking and product development.

### **Our Middle Name**

Flexibility is supposed to be an overriding feature of services to highly able youth (our proverbial middle name), and the pull-out model provides opportunities for flexibility in identification as well as programming. One of the greatest advantages of the pull-out model is that it can help us to avoid identification procedures that are based on an absolutist conception of giftedness. This conception, which has been largely disproven by the work of Sternberg, Gardner, and others (Sternberg & Davidson, 1986), treats giftedness as an absolute construct—something that you always have or never have! Identification systems based on this conception are generally all-or-nothing arrangements, and most administrative models using this approach (including pull-out programs) required that students be either totally in or totally out of a special program.

A more relativistic conception of giftedness (Renzulli, 1986) takes a somewhat different approach, and one in which the pull-out model has certain advantages. This approach is based on four major assumptions. First, the relativistic approach emphasizes labeling the services rather than the students. Second, this approach is designed to develop gifted behaviors in above average ability students rather than certifying that a young person is "truly gifted" before we will make any services available to that student. Third, this approach maintains that gifted behaviors can be developed in certain people, at certain times, and under certain circumstances. Finally, a relativistic approach views gifted behaviors such as creativity, leadership, task commitment and self-directedness as the objectives of special programs rather than predetermining conditions for entrance into services.

How can this approach favor pull-out programs? In full time programs or special classes, a student must, by necessity, be either in or out of the program. It is difficult to imagine how a

bright student at the elementary level might, for example, participate in a full time class for the gifted when his or her special aptitude and interest relate to a single area such as science or creative writing. A pull-out program, on the other hand, allows for some flexibility in providing special services according to individual abilities, interests and learning styles. Although many pull-out programs are still based on the absolutist conception, and therefore all-or-nothing identification procedures, they nevertheless allow for certain kinds of flexibility. Such flexibility might enable classroom teachers to make referrals at those times and under those circumstances when a bright youngster shows a remarkable need for the kinds of opportunities, resources, and encouragement that are the hallmark of truly gifted services that can be made available through special programs. A more flexible approach to identification also provides the very best rationale for grouping. In this case, groups can be based on advanced level interests in a particular topic or area of study. Thus, for example, a group of young Steven Spielberg's or Woody Allen's from several different classrooms (or schools) can come together to pursue their passion for film making in a manner that might not be feasible or even possible if flexibility in student deployment is not a part of the administrative pattern of program organization.

The artistic, intellectual, and social interaction that takes place within such a domain-focused group is far more natural and mutually beneficial than either a prescribed activity in film making (c.f., the academic freedom argument) or a film making opportunity for preselected "gifted students" that might leave out a youngster with the highest potential and passion for film making in the entire school, simply because she or he has not been selected for the gifted program. In the real world of creative and productive accomplishments, people come together as groups first and foremost because of mutual interests, and a shared commitment to pursue these interests in more than common and ordinary ways. Pull-out programs allow for such flexibility because, unlike the full time or special class model, we have neither prejudged the entire curriculum nor the types of students who might best benefit from a given set of opportunities, resources, and encouragement.

This type of flexibility at the elementary level can also serve another important purpose. And although I will call this an identification purpose, it should be emphasized that I do not mean a round-about or disguised method for determining who is "gifted." Rather, an elementary film making experience such as the one described above might help us to identify any one or a combination of three things. First, it might tell us which student or students can best profit from ever escalating services in film making, including services that may be beyond the resources or expertise of school personnel. Second, this approach can help us to identify whether or not we should consider a special class or a mini-course in film making at the junior or senior high school levels. In those cases, where the number of students with superior interest in this area is limited, we can explore other alternatives such as internships or summer programs. Third, the film making experience will help the youngsters themselves to identify, positively or negatively, the strength of this interest and their commitment to pursuing it through a broader array of services and advance levels of involvement.

Note that in these three identification functions, the emphasis is once again placed on identifying the services and follow-up opportunities rather than labeling the students as "gifted." If our ever escalating efforts to develop gifted behaviors achieves its desired result, it will be

because we have cast our net wider at these younger age levels rather than predetermining which elementary school child is gifted or which ones must study film making.

### **The Keepers of the Dream, The Makers of the Movement**

As was indicated earlier in this article, programs for gifted and talented students have never enjoyed long term popularity in American education. Although there are undoubtedly many reasons for the here today/gone tomorrow syndrome that has characterized the gifted student movement, one reason for our limited longevity has undoubtedly been a failure to create a large and dedicated category of professionals within the general education community that have a primary affiliation with the gifted student movement. It is probably safe to say that the overwhelming majority of persons currently working within the gifted education movement are resource teachers who work primarily in pull-out programs. It is these persons who take the courses, read the journals, support the legislation, operate the professional organizations, and do all of the kinds of things that make gifted education a distinct entity from other subcategories of the education profession (e.g., math education, science education, etc.). It is this group (rather than the advanced placement math teacher or the professor who teaches science in a summer program) that has truly made the gifted education movement a reality in our schools, and it is the professionalism and advocacy of this group that has undoubtedly resulted in the popularity of the movement that we are now experiencing.

If you doubt the validity of this statement, check the job descriptions of the persons who are the movers and shakers of gifted education in your state. You will find, as I did, that the majority of persons in this cadre of professionals are (or were) resource teachers who work in pull-out programs. Although there is currently an effort underway to criticize the pull-out model (Cox, Daniel, & Boston, 1985), one of the side effects of this effort may very well be the dismantling of this cadre of professionals. It would be nothing short of ironic to do away with the professional positions of the very group that has been responsible for the remarkable growth that gifted programs have experienced during the past few years.

This issue became clear to me in a recent conversation with an advanced placement class teacher of mathematics. Because of the innovative way in which this person combines both enrichment and acceleration in her classes, I suggested that she consider making a presentation at the annual conference of the National Association for Gifted Children. Her reply was direct and to the point: "I can only attend one professional conference a year, and I always go to the National Council of Teachers of Mathematics meeting." I might add that this person does not participate in professional activities within our state, I have never seen her at the annual legislative hearings on gifted programs, and I doubt that she considers herself to be even peripherally related to the gifted student movement. Although I admire this person's competency, and respect the important role that she fulfills in teaching advanced level courses, her professional identity is clearly outside of the mainstream gifted movement. And this is as it should be!

But who will show up at the hearings on legislation this year? And who will volunteer for a committee to rewrite our state guidelines so that we can better serve high potential disadvantaged or underachieving students? My own experience has been that the majority of

these persons will be resource teachers from pull-out programs because their professional affiliation has to do with giftedness. They are the keepers of the dream and the developers of the technology that has helped to define gifted education as an identifiable entity within the many other sub-categories of professional education. It is these persons, to whom I affectionately refer as positive malcontents, who have purposefully escaped the bonds of regular teaching so that they can experiment with, and include in their teaching, the many kinds of things that have become the technology of gifted education.

It is this group that has sought to achieve the academic freedom discussed earlier. They have sought alternatives to the prescribed and presented curriculum, and they have pioneered the kinds of teaching strategies that have helped to define the concept of differentiated teaching. Without such people and the kinds of freedom that they enjoy in pull-out programs, I believe that we would revert to a major model of teaching that consists mainly of speeded up coverage of regular curricular material that is taught mainly through a didactic mode. I also believe that the gifted student movement would quickly diminish in size and impact.

### References

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