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The Reform Movement and the Quiet Crisis in Gifted Education

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Abstract

The reform movement in education appears to focus on the ways in which schools are organized and managed rather than on the interaction that takes place among teachers, students, and the material to be learned. In the process of designing reform to encourage our most promising students and also to meet the needs of at-risk students, we need to examine the types of changes currently being advocated. An examination of the various reform efforts and the effect that they are having on gifted education is provided in this article. Rather than allowing all reform movements to affect our students without our consent (especially those that call for the elimination of grouping), we need to address the impact of gifted education programs and practices and how they might influence the reform effort. We must also be concerned with continued advocacy for gifted programming, creating and maintaining exemplary programs and practices that can serve as models of what can be accomplished for high ability students. Simply to allow high ability students to be placed in classrooms in which no provisions will be made for their special needs is an enormous step backwards for our field. To lose our quest for excellence in the current move to guarantee equity will undoubtedly result in a disappointing, if not disastrous, education for our most potentially able children.

> Nobody believes in action any more, so words have become a substitute, all the way up to the top, a substitute for the truth nobody wants to hear because they can't change it, or they'll lose their jobs if they change it, or maybe they simply don't know how to change it.
>
> John le Carré
> *The Russia House*

Although a crisis is something that usually follows in the aftermath of a natural disaster or political upheaval, there is also a kind of crisis that sneaks up on us and takes its toll before we even know that a problem has been simmering beneath the surface of a seemingly stable environment. This type of "quiet crisis" often knocks off its victims one at a time and therefore prevents the kind of mobilization that might be possible if the nature of the crisis was more sensational. We believe that the field of education for the gifted and talented is currently facing a quiet crisis and that in many

ways this crisis is directly related to the educational reform movement in America. In our opinion, the major focus of the reform movement is on cosmetic administrative changes in the ways in which schools are organized and managed rather than on the essential three-way interaction that takes place among teachers, students, and the material to be learned. In short, the grand designs of restructuring seem to be focusing on everything but the heart of the learning process.

We also believe that this quiet crisis is the direct result of the conflict that exists between two noble goals of American education, both of which have given rise to the reform movement but have not been able to live in harmony with one another. In the sections that follow, we will discuss these goals, but before doing so, we want to point out that both goals are important, and we do not believe that because one of the goals relates to serving gifted and talented youth, it should be pursued at the expense of the other goal, which focuses on general education and the education of at-risk youngsters. In the final section, we will make some recommendations that might provide a plan for achieving a resolution between the two seemingly incompatible goals.

Noble Goal #1: ***To provide the best possible education to our most promising students so that we can reassert America's prominence in the intellectual, artistic, and moral leadership of the world.***

For reasons that are discussed in the following paragraphs, Noble Goal #1 has finally made it to the "front burner" of American education. Up to this point in our history, the goal was less important because the economy and the society at large could only absorb a certain amount of high level talent. The gigantic filtration system known as the public schools delivered to colleges and universities a fairly good supply of the nation's best and brightest—if, of course, they had the ability to pay the costs of higher education or were fortunate enough to obtain some of the limited available financial assistance. With the help of the immigration process, industry was able to fill both its top level and blue collar needs, and industry was not unhappy about the availability of a large labor force with strong backs and willing hands. The fact that this filtration system excluded vast numbers of the ethnic poor, females, and nontraditional learners did not seem to bother social planners because our nation was leading the world in agriculture, scientific development, and industrial productivity. But "the times they are a'changing," and as we enter what economists have called the postindustrial age, we must reexamine the ways in which our educational system has dealt with this change.

Whether we are willing to admit it or not, America is rapidly becoming a second rate nation in all of the areas on which we prided ourselves in the past. Not only has assembly line productivity fallen behind competition from Asian and Western European nations, but we are also losing the knowledge and the creativity races—areas that traditionally have been viewed as the turf of special educational efforts for gifted and talented students. Japan now produces almost twice the number of scientists and engineers per 10,000 people as the U.S., and Korea has the highest number of PhDs per capita in the world (Naisbitt & Aburdene, 1990). While America once viewed itself as a place where we designed and invented what other nations manufactured, Naisbitt and Aburdene (1990) report that the Japanese are now playing a leading role in fashion

design, the arts, and almost all other areas of industrial, commercial, and domestic design (pp. 181–182). According to the *New York Times* (in Doyle, 1989), Japan's annual share of American patents grew over the last 15 years from 4% to 19%, while our own share dropped 20% over the same period. *Statistical Abstracts of the United States, 1988* reported that 47% of all patents issued by the U.S. Patent Office were to foreign companies or individuals, and that only 2 of the 10 companies with the most patents were American. Like the colonies of the seventeen and eighteen hundreds, we are exporting more and more of our raw materials and importing larger amounts of high technology from abroad.

Although the reasons for our declining leadership and productivity are obviously complex and diverse, our nation's schools have been cited as a major cause of our inability to meet the challenge from abroad. Reports such as *A Nation at Risk* and books such as Alan Bloom's *The Closing of the American Mind* (1987) all point to an educational system that is indeed in need of reform at all levels. SAT scores, which fell precipitously in the sixties and seventies have rebounded by only 16 points—still 90 points below their historic highs. The number of high scores (650 or higher out of 800) on both the verbal and mathematical portions of the SAT remain lower than in the 1950s (Doyle, 1989, p. E14). At one time we rationalized declining SAT scores by pointing out that more students were taking the tests and therefore dragging down the national averages, but a recent report by the International Association of Educational Achievement (1988) has presented some shocking statistics with regard to our most gifted students.

> The most able U.S. students scored the lowest of all these countries [Hungary, Scotland, Canada, Finland, Sweden, New Zealand, Japan, Belgium, England, and Israel]. Average Japanese students achieved higher than the top 5% of the U.S. students in college preparatory mathematics… The U.S. came out the lowest of any country for which data were available. That is to say, the algebra achievement of our most able students (the top 1%) was lower than the top 1% of any other country… and our top 5% was lower than any other country except Israel… In the upper grades of secondary school, advanced science students in the U.S. were last in biology and behind most students in chemistry and physics… What's more, it is not that children in other countries are just a bunch of grinds who do better on their tests because they memorize reams of information by rote. Instead, it turns out that, the more complex and advanced the concepts being tested, the worse the American students do in the comparisons. (p. 12)

Consider the following two mathematics problems reported by Kie Ho (1990), a research scientist who is the parent of Asian-American children attending school in California.

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? (p. 20)

The upshot of all this for both our most promising young people and for our nation's future role in world affairs is apparent. While the quiet crisis has produced a firestorm of rhetoric about the need for reform, we must examine the degree to which such rhetoric has promoted real and lasting change, and we must also examine the types of changes that are being advocated. If Noble Goal #1 is to develop a plan that will promote challenge and excellence for high potential youth, then a good starting point might be to take a look at the history of previous reform efforts, and especially the discrepancy between the ideal and the reality of making even small changes in places called schools. Almost every major effort to reform American education has been met with limited and temporary success. Progressive education, programmed instruction, discovery learning, open education, and a host of other "innovations" lie battered and broken on the roadside of educational reform. Goodlad (1983), Cuban (1982), and other analysts tell us that in spite of massive efforts and billions of dollars expended to bring about significant changes in the education process, present-day schools bear a striking resemblance to the structure of education at the turn of the century. Whole group instruction, prescribed and didactic curriculum, and an emphasis on standardized achievement and minimum competence have turned our schools into dreary places that can't begin to compete with nonschool interests, extracurricular activities, and endless hours in front of the television set.

Noble Goal #2: ***To improve the education of at-risk students [and especially those students in inner city schools and rural poor areas] who, if they don't drop out, often graduate from high school without the ability to read, write, or do basic arithmetic.***

This second goal has unquestionably been the driving force in American education since the reform movement began in the early 1960s. A concern for at-risk

students led to the first major federal support for general education through the Head Start program, and since that time, literally billions of federal and state dollars have been appropriated to help overcome limited achievement on the part of children and youth from disadvantaged backgrounds. It would be nothing short of immoral to question the value of this goal, and even to hint that it has drawn support away from services to gifted and talented students would conjure up all of the social and political criticisms about elitism that our field has judiciously sought to avoid. But the nobility of the goal should not prevent us from questioning the wisdom and the quality of means used to achieve it, nor should it preclude an examination of the side effects of these actions on all aspects of education. Such an examination is even more consequential when we consider the undeniable fact that, at best, most of these actions have had limited impact. Each year, 700,000 functionally illiterate students graduate from U.S. high schools, dropout rates hover around 25%, and they exceed 50% in many of the nation's urban centers (Doyle, 1989, pp. E14, 22).

Not only is there a problem at the elementary and secondary school levels, but the colleges in which our most able students matriculate are also experiencing severe problems. In a report issued by the National Science Foundation's Disciplinary Workshops on undergraduate education (April, 1989), several problems in the sciences were cited. "Undergraduate education in science and engineering in the United States is in a state of crisis…" (Chemistry Workshop, p. 3), and "inadequate precollege instruction, declining enrollments, deteriorating instructional facilities and lack of funding for research efforts involving students are particularly evident" (Geosciences Workshop, p. 3). To be certain, isolated examples of success have emerged from the multitude of programs and projects that have attempted to improve education for at-risk students. But for the vast majority, nothing of any consequence has taken place. Achievement continues to decline or remain at low levels, the dropout rate continues to climb, and related problems such as unemployability, teenage pregnancy, drug and alcohol addiction, suicide, crime, and despair on the part of young people are increasing.

The nobility of the second goal and our failure to achieve it has resulted in nothing short of desperate acts of decision making on the part of policy makers. Standardized achievement testing and minimum competence have become the trademarks of the effectiveness movement, and the concept of "excellence" has in many instances been interpreted as "getting the scores up" a few points higher than last year! *Minimum* competence has become the goal rather than the starting point, and the mentality of a test-driven education system has even caused schools with generally good reputations to eliminate or reduce enrichment programs in order to save a few dollars that might be spent to gain a few points' advantage over the next town on the statewide competency tests. And in times of tight budgets, the let's-get-rid-of-the-frills argument has great appeal to anxious taxpayers.

Failure to achieve Noble Goal #2 is undoubtedly the strongest motivation behind the reform movement. And, as is always the case when frustration turns to desperation, peremptory solutions are sought, solutions that seldom have any basis in research and sometimes even less basis in logic or common sense. Our schools have been subjected to an ever-growing list of regulations and a test-driven curriculum that is unprecedented

in the history of central planning. The motives for these actions on the part of policy makers are certainly high minded, but as Atkin (1990) points out, the results often produce unintended uniformity and discourage local initiative and imagination:

> State policy makers and school officers must think not simply about one school or community, but many. Pockets of initiative and imagination may be fine, but public policies are usually directed toward improvement of the entire system. *And there's the rub.* Time and again, existing patterns of state-level policy making-with their emphasis on standardization, compulsion and regulation—militate against local variation, whether it be helpful or harmful. And though prescription and regulation may help insure against unsound practice, they are not likely to motivate the most gifted people in a school or in a community. (p. 36) (italics added)

We can better understand "the rub" when we translate it into actual practice. How did some educators jump from the Carnegie Commission's criticism of grouping to doing away with honors classes or replacing entire programs for the gifted with cooperative learning? How do required statewide proficiency examinations translate into every student working on the exact same page and text on any given day of the year? How does the adoption of a policy for school-based management result in turning all curricular decisions over to the union or to an inexperienced parent group? How does Benjamin Bloom's concept of mastery learning result in successful students marking time until less successful students are retaught and retested? And how do a few insubstantial and even trivial studies on grouping (mainly dealing with the social aspects) result in all of the nation's governors calling for an end to any kind of special grouping arrangements?

The Cruel Tricks Game

Our inability to make any important gains in overcoming the plight of at-risk students has resulted in a short but devastating list of "cruel tricks" that have been used in attempts to explain our failures and lead at-risk youth and their parents to believe that sincere efforts are being made on their behalf. Early rationalizations were embedded in the heredity and environment controversy. Thus, the first explanation was that nonmajority youth were genetically inferior and therefore simply unable to learn at rates and levels commensurate with the majority population. Although this notion has been disproven, the environmentalists have not been much help in offering solutions. Simply stating (or even proving) that poverty, discrimination, and *de facto* segregation are major contributors to school failure only serves to highlight societal problems that will take generations to overcome. But it is a cruel trick to lead people to believe that ineffective schools are the cause rather than the result of such problems. And it is an even crueler trick to lead people to believe that one or another quick-fix restructuring scheme will overcome the accumulated effects of poverty, discrimination, and segregation. The environmentalists also added their own contribution to the cruel tricks game by blaming the families and community backgrounds. Maintaining that the families of at-risk groups failed to prepare their children for school and support them in educational pursuits was

yet another rationalization to justify labeling, tracking, and generally lowering expectations for large segments of the population.

Another wave of rationalizations for poor schools attempted to lay the blame on the teaching profession and teacher education, the perennial whipping boy for almost all educational dilemmas. This explanation resulted in a new surge of regimented teaching formulas and a proliferation of so-called teacher-proof materials. These formulas and materials, with their emphasis on prescription, control, and the standardization of the learning process, effectively factored out the intelligence, understanding, and creativity that teachers might otherwise bring to bear on situations that require imagination, individualization, and enjoyment in learning.

Blaming the tests came next in the cruel tricks game, and so we progressed through a period of giving new names to the same old procedures for assessment; but by now the tests had become the dominant decision maker for almost all educational activity. In rapid succession, achievement tests became criterion-referenced tests, minimum competency tests, and now there is a movement afoot to rename them curriculum-referenced tests. Although there is a good deal of rhetoric about alternative forms of assessment through procedures such as product evaluation and student portfolios, serious efforts in these directions are almost always clobbered to death by state regulators and basic skills advocates who say, “Yes, but…” and then wrap themselves in the flags of reliability, validity, and objectivity. Tests of general intelligence are indeed being deemphasized, mainly as a result of new theories such as Gardner’s work on multiple intelligences (Gardner, 1983). But the testing establishment’s obsession with metric measurement has mainly resulted in replacing a general metric (i.e., the IQ) with a broader range of specific scores. The overpowering influence of metric measurement on the curriculum penalizes teachers who want to move away from the “drill and kill” routines that are supposed to pump up test scores. Even the emerging trend toward introducing more thinking skills into the curriculum has largely been relegated to formula-driven practices and prescriptive exercises that can easily be assessed by marking the preferred response on a multiple choice answer sheet. So now, instead of publishing the district-by-district achievement test scores on the front pages of the states’ leading newspapers, we will play the same old game with thinking skills test results and pretend that we have something that is a true reform or major act of restructuring. And when the renamed tests fail once again to explain the gap that exists between advantaged and disadvantaged communities, the testing lobby will offer its tedious and time-worn cliche: “The problems associated with standardized tests are not inherent in the tests themselves, but rather in the ways in which they are used.”

New Tricks on the Block

Since none of these earlier tricks has explained discrepancies in learning, much less enabled us to do anything about them, the search for additional excuses to stem the dramatic increase in dissatisfaction with the schools continues; and with each new rationalization come recommendations for yet another unexamined panacea. But now, policy makers are really getting desperate because the public *and larger and larger numbers of teachers and administrators* are calling for actions that could be the first

steps in dismantling public education. Voucher systems and tax rebates for private schools, issues that were only talked about a decade ago, have become realities in some states and are under consideration in others.

The newest trick on the block is a simple but potentially devastating one for almost all students. By dragging the nation's entire school achievement level down so low that group differences are minimized, it will *appear* as if at-risk students are closing the gap with their higher scoring peers. If this accusation seems to border on the fanatical, consider the following two practices that are already underway in our schools.

The Dumbing Down of the Curriculum

A study conducted by the Education Products Information Exchange Institute (1979), a nonprofit educational consumer agency, revealed that 60% of the fourth graders in certain school districts' studies were able to achieve a score of 80% or higher on a test of the content of their math texts before they had opened their books in September. Similar findings were reported in content tests with fourth and tenth grade science texts and with tenth grade social studies texts.

In a more recent study dealing with average and above-average readers, Taylor and Frye (1988) found that 78 to 88% of fifth and sixth grade average readers could pass pretests on basal comprehension skills before they were covered by the basal reader. The average students were performing at approximately 92% accuracy and the better readers were performing at 93% on comprehension skills pretests.

One reason that so many average and above-average students can demonstrate mastery of the regular curriculum in this way is that contemporary textbooks are so much easier than they were only decades ago. Former Secretary of Education Terrel Bell labeled this practice the "dumbing down" of textbooks and criticized the publishing industry for their textbook content as well as the policies and procedures of textbook adoption committees across the country.

Textbooks have dropped two grade levels in difficulty over the past 10 to 15 years. Kirst (1982) reports: "When Californians tried to reserve two slots on the statewide adoption list for textbooks that would challenge the top one-third of students, no publisher had a book to present. They could only suggest reissuing textbooks from the late sixties (now unacceptable because of their inaccurate portrayals of women and minorities) or writing new ones, a three to five year project" (p. 7). The lack of challenge in textbooks has been cited by every major content group in our country. In a national report on the future of mathematics, Lynn Arthur Steen, a professor of mathematics at St. Olaf College, aptly summarizes the problems associated with the lack of challenge in mathematics: "In fact if not in law, we have a national course of study in mathematics. It is an 'underachieving' curriculum that follows a spiral of constant radius, each year reviewing so much of the past that little new learning takes place" (1989, p. 2).

Harriet T. Bernstein (1985), who has written extensively on the politics of textbook adoption and the mandated use of readability formulas, believes that publishers have

been impelled to change textbooks to meet state or local readability formulas. She believes that these formulas have resulted in textbooks that flit from topic to topic and result in what textbook researchers call “mentioning.” Bernstein aptly summarizes the particular problem that current textbooks pose for gifted and talented students: “Even if there were good rules of thumb about the touchy subject of the difficulty of textbooks, the issue becomes moot when a school district buys only one textbook, usually at ‘grade level’ for all students in a subject or grade. Such a purchasing policy pressures adoption committees to buy books that the least-able students can read. As a result, the needs of more advanced students are sacrificed” (p. 465). Imagine, for example, the frustration faced by a precocious reader entering kindergarten or first grade. When a six-year-old who loves to read and is accustomed to reading several books a day encounters the typical basal reading system, the beginning of the end of a love affair with reading may result. As Brown and Rogan (1983) have stated, “For primary level gifted children who have already begun to read, modification toward the mean represents a serious regression” (p. 6). Savage (1983) believes that basals may not be the best way to promote reading interest and ability: “Very capable readers often find the story content uninteresting, the reading level unchallenging, and the tedious inevitability of the follow-up workbook pages an anathema. Children with considerable reading ability can be held back by rigidly marching page by page through a basal program” (p. 9).

In our field tests of curriculum modification through curriculum compacting (Renzulli, Reis, & Smith, 1981) during the last decade, we have found that most elementary classroom teachers can eliminate as much as 50% of the basal regular curriculum for students who qualify for admission into programs based on the Enrichment Triad Model, or approximately 10–15% of students in the general population. In basal language arts and mathematics programs, it is not unusual for extremely bright youngsters to be able to have 80% of their regular curriculum eliminated. Our field tests of compacting at the middle school level have demonstrated that in classes where students can be grouped by their prior knowledge of the subject and interest in the subject, approximately 50% of the regular curriculum can be eliminated. In fact, many content area teachers who have worked with bright students in self-contained classes indicate that they cover the regular curriculum in two days a week, leaving the majority of time for alternate work.

Because of the change in textbooks and because repetition is built into all curricular approaches to reinforce learning, many gifted students spend much of their time in school practicing skills and reading content they already know. This is documented by the widespread dissatisfaction expressed by so many school personnel about the use of basal textbooks for high ability students. Despite research by Kulik & Kulik (1984), Slavin (1984). Slavin (1986), Slavin, Karweit, & Madden (1989), and others indicating that students learn skills and concepts at a faster rate when grouping and individualization take place, teachers still utilize whole-group instruction (Cuban, 1982, Goodlad, 1983, 1984).

The Elimination of Grouping

The second practice that will undoubtedly result in dragging down achievement throughout the entire country is the current trend of eliminating most forms of grouping. Before discussing some of the issues related to grouping, we want to emphasize that a distinction is made between grouping and tracking. We view tracking as the general and usually permanent assignment of students to classes that are taught at a certain level, and that usually are taught using a whole-group instructional model. Grouping, on the other hand, is viewed as the more flexible (i.e., less permanent) arrangement of students that takes into consideration factors *in addition to* ability, and sometimes in place of ability. These factors might include motivation, specific interests, complementary skills (e.g., an artist who might illustrate the short stories of students in a creative writing group), career aspirations, and even friendships that might help to promote self-concept, self-efficacy, or group harmony. The major criteria for group effectiveness are commonality of purpose, mutual respect and harmony, group and individual progress toward goals, and individual enjoyment and satisfaction.

The argument over grouping has been a long and passionate one, and every faction rattles off its cache of research studies, while simultaneously pointing out the shortcomings of research presented by the opposition. And like armies who are convinced that God is on their side, adversaries even lay claim to the same study by adding their own surplus interpretation or procedure for reanalyzing the data. For the sake of argument, we will take the neutral position that there is no conclusive evidence to support or refute the effects of ability grouping on achievement.[1] But let us examine how a few studies that reported negative social and attitudinal effects of grouping have been blown out of proportion in the popular press and in nonresearch journals. In an article in *The Middle School Journal* entitled “Tracking and Grouping: Which Way for the Middle School?” (1988), George uses the results of a questionnaire to draw conclusions that are clearly not justified by the data. But the most manipulative practice was carried out by the journal’s editors who selected out takes (large type, bold print quotes) that unanimously favored the antigrouping position and that were in agreement with their own position as set forth in an editor’s note preceding the article. A subsequent report sponsored by the National Association of Secondary School Principals (Toepfer, 1989) draws upon the earlier article in a fashion that would lead the casual reader to believe that it is more powerful research than is the case; and then the report proceeds to highlight yet another string of antigrouping statements. What has clearly happened is that commentators are using “the research” to support a political issue rather than an educational issue, and “the research” has become little more than a pawn that is being used for political expediency. The best way to substantiate this accusation about political interpretation of research is to assume for a minute that the research on grouping is inconclusive or neutral and then examine conclusions drawn from grouping studies. Whenever average or below-average students fail to show growth in achievement from grouping studies, the almost universal conclusion is that it is the fault

[1] Actually, the research on grouping has the strongest and clearest effects for high ability students. See especially Rogers (in press). Kulik & Kulik (1992), Kulik & Kulik (1984), and Kulik & Kulik (1987).

of grouping. But note how some writers use another set of logic when positive growth occurs.

> Gifted and special education programs may be conceived of as one form of ability grouping, but they also involve many other changes in curriculum, class size, resources, and goals that make them fundamentally different from comprehensive ability grouping plans… Studies of special programs for the gifted tend to find achievement benefits for the gifted students… and others, would give the impression that ability grouping is beneficial for high achievers and detrimental for low achievers. *However, it is likely that characteristics of special accelerated programs for the gifted account for the effects of gifted programs, not the fact of separate grouping per se…* (Slavin, 1984, p. 307) (italics added)

We have attempted to point out this exercise in illogic (see Figure 1) by contrasting the conclusions of a typical research paradigm that might be used to study the effects of grouping. If the research is inconsistent and far from overwhelming in either direction, then we are at least obligated to apply the same set of logic to the interpretation of those studies that are available. *You can't have it both ways!* If positive growth is the result of curriculum adaptations, class size, resources, and goals, why then cannot we apply the same explanation to cases in which growth is not shown and then use this finding as a rationale for exploring ways to promote better performance in lower achieving students?

Figure 1. Research Paradigm on the Effects of Grouping

Population Studied →	Variables Examined →	Findings →	Conclusions
Average Ability and At-Risk Students	Effects of Grouping	Lack of Growth	It was the *grouping* that did it!
Students in Programs for the Gifted and Talented	Effects of Grouping	Positive Growth	It *wasn't* the grouping that did it!

A popular item that is currently receiving front page attention in the national press and almost universal coverage in the professional literature is the list of national goals for the year 2000 (National Governors' Association, 1990). High on this list is a goal that states, "Challenge educators to eliminate ability grouping and tracking." This "headline" item has already provided a rationale for some administrators and policy makers to eliminate or severely water down programs for high potential students. Persons who use these headlines ordinarily do not "read the small print," but if they did, they would find within the context of the same report, the following disclaimer:

> Eliminating these practices does not require ending special opportunities for students, such as gifted and talented or Advanced Placement courses. Nor does it mean abandoning special education or remedial programs for those who need additional services or assistance. (p. 17)

Surviving the Quiet Crisis

The results of Noble Goal #2 have already had a major impact on gifted education. As Bernstein has pointed out, when districts select textbooks that the majority of students can read, the inevitable outcome is a declining level of challenge for higher ability students. The result of the dumbing down of the curriculum and the proliferation of basic skills practice material may result in the creation of the largest percentage of high ability underachievers in the history of public schools in America. Many of these bright students will learn at a very early age that if they do their best in school, they will be rewarded by endless pages of more of the same kind of practice materials. These same young people may also learn that if they display their abilities in a heterogeneous classroom, the result may be ridicule from peers and the attainment of one of a multitude of nicknames, including brain, nerd, dweeb, and/or others. Consider the following quotation written by a high school student in support of homogeneous grouping and gifted programs for high ability students:

> In my 12 years in Torrington Schools, I have been placed in many “average” classes—especially up until the junior high school level—in which I have been spit on, ostracized, and verbally abused for doing my homework on a regular basis, for raising my hand in class, and particularly for receiving outstanding grades.(Peters, 1990)

Sharing the Technology

Perhaps one way that we can achieve resolution between the two national goals discussed in this article is through extending the technology that has been developed in gifted and talented programs to a broader spectrum of general education (Renzulli & Reis, 1985). Our field’s technology admittedly will not provide quick-fix solutions to the organizational questions raised by the reform movement, but it can offer numerous creative alternatives regarding instruction and curriculum. In our relatively short history we have achieved a rather impressive menu of exciting curricular adaptations, thinking skills applications, methods for teaching independent study, and numerous other innovations. For example, specialists in the area of education of the gifted have concentrated on identifying student interests and learning styles and providing relevant and challenging curricular experiences to individual students instead of identical experiences to 30 students in a classroom without consideration of their previous knowledge or background.

Specialists in the area of gifted education have also gained expertise in adjusting the regular curriculum to meet the needs of advanced students in a variety of ways, including accelerating content, incorporating a thematic approach, and substituting more challenging textbooks or assignments. As depicted in Figure 2, the present range of

instructional techniques used in most classrooms observed by Goodlad (1984) and his colleagues is vastly different from what is recommended in many gifted programs today. The flexibility in grouping that is encouraged in many gifted programs might also be helpful in other types of educational settings.

Figure 2. Provisions for Gifted Students in Regular Classroom Settings

Present Reality of Activities for Students in Upper Elementary Classrooms	Percent	***Observable Provisions Suggested for Gifted Students in Classroom Settings***
Written Work	30.4	Differentiated Curriculum—Higher Level Content
Listening to Explanations/Lectures	20.1	Curriculum Compacting or Modification
Preparation for Assignments	11.5	Adaptation of Classwork for Individual Learning Styles
Discussion	7.7	Assignment of More Challenging Written Work or Reading Material
Reading	5.5	Independent or Small Group Work on Assigned Topics
Practice/Performing-Physical	5.3	Learning Centers
Use of AV Equipment	4.9	Small Group Work on Self-Selected Interests
Student Nontask Behavior—No Assignment	4.8	Use of Contracts or Management Plans to Facilitate Independent Study
Practice/Performance-Verbal	4.4	Use of Instructional Grouping to Facilitate Individual Needs
Taking Tests	3.3	Self-Directed Learning/Decision-Making Opportunities for Students
Watching Demonstrations	1.0	Provision for Open-Ended Thinking and Problem Solving
Simulation/Role Play	0.4	
Being Disciplined	0.3	
(Goodlad, 1984, P. 107)		(Renzulli, 1986)

We can, therefore, make every attempt to share with other educators the technology we have gained in teaching students process skills, modifying the regular curriculum, and helping students become producers of knowledge (Renzulli, 1977). We can extend enrichment activities and provide staff development in the many principles that guide our programming models. Yet without the changes at the local, state, and national policy-making levels that will alter the current emphasis on raising test scores and purchasing unchallenging, flat, and downright sterile textbooks, our efforts may be insignificant.

Maintaining Our Identity

Until the reform movement has produced a sufficient impact on current educational policy, we cannot afford to channel the majority of our efforts into providing staff development and technical assistance to classroom teachers to meet the needs of gifted students in regular classroom settings. Because of fiscal constraints, more and more gifted programs are being eliminated and fewer students are being challenged by these programs. Consider the following correspondence received from a classroom teacher with 10 years of experience and a graduate degree in education of the gifted and talented.

> My frustration at not being able to adequately challenge the gifted students in my heterogeneous classroom grows each year. With 28 students of varying levels and abilities and special needs, I often find the most neglected are the brightest. Even though I know *what* to do for these youngsters, I simply do not have the time to provide the differentiated instruction they need and deserve. Instead, my attention shifts, as it has in the past, to the students in my class with special learning problems who are already terribly behind in second grade. (P. C. Morgan, personal communication, September 10, 1990)

While sharing our technology is, indeed, one of our own noble goals, we must continue to create and maintain exemplary programs and practices that serve as models of what *can be* accomplished for high ability students. Through our professional organizations we must continue to advocate the different needs of high ability students. We must argue logically and forcefully to maintain the programs, the equitable grouping practices, and the differentiated learning experiences that the students we represent so desperately need. Simply to allow these youngsters to be placed in classrooms in which no provisions will be made for their special needs is an enormous step backwards for our field. To lose our quest for excellence in the current move to guarantee equity will undoubtedly result in a disappointing, if not disastrous, education for our most potentially able children.

A Change in Direction: From Being Gifted to the Development of Gifted Behaviors

While we believe it is imperative to maintain our identity through our programs and professional organizations, we advocate, as we have in the past (Renzulli, 1980), a slight change in our labeling processes. Up to this time, the general approach to the study of gifted persons could easily lead the casual reader to believe that giftedness is an absolute condition that is magically bestowed upon a person in much the same way that nature endows us with blue eyes, red hair, or a dark complexion. This position is not supported by the research. For too many years we have pretended that we can identify gifted children in an absolute and unequivocal fashion. Many people have been led to believe that certain individuals have been endowed with a golden chromosome that makes him or her “a gifted person.” This belief has further led to the mistaken idea that all we need to do is find the right combination of factors that prove the existence of this “gift.” The further use of terms such as “the truly gifted,” “the highly gifted,” “the moderately gifted,” and “the borderline gifted” only serve to confound the issue because

they invariably hearken back to a conception of giftedness that equates the concept with test scores. The misuse of the concept of giftedness has given rise to a great deal of criticism and confusion about both identification and programming, and the result has been that so many mixed messages have been sent to educators and the public at large that both groups now have a justifiable skepticism about the credibility of the gifted education establishment and our ability to offer services that are qualitatively different from general education.

Most of the confusion and controversy surrounding the definitions of giftedness that have been offered by various writers can be placed into proper perspective if we examine a few key questions. Is giftedness an absolute or a relative concept? That is, is a person either gifted or not gifted (the absolute view), or can varying degrees of gifted behavior be developed in certain people, at certain times, and under certain circumstances (the relative view)? Is gifted a static concept (i.e., you have or you don't have it) or is it a dynamic concept (i.e., it varies within persons and learning/performance situations)?

These questions have led us to advocate a fundamental change in the ways the concept of giftedness should be viewed in the future. Except for certain functional purposes related mainly to professional focal points (i.e., research, training, legislation) and to ease of expression, we believe that labeling students as "the gifted" is counterproductive to the educational efforts aimed at providing supplementary educational experiences for certain students in the general school population. We believe that our field should shift its emphasis from a traditional concept of "being gifted" (or not being gifted) to a concern about the development of gifted behaviors in those youngsters who have the highest potential for benefiting from special educational services. This slight shift in terminology might appear to be an exercise in heuristic hair splitting, but we believe that it has significant implications for the entire way that we think about the concept of giftedness and the ways in which we should structure our identification and programming endeavors. This change in terminology may also provide the flexibility in both identification and programming endeavors that will encourage the inclusion of at-risk and underachieving students in our programs. If that occurs, not only will we be giving these high potential youngsters an opportunity to participate, we will also help to eliminate the charges of elitism and bias in grouping that are sometimes legitimately directed at some gifted programs.

Reform, restructuring, and innovation are not just the catch-words of the 1990s. Efforts to change and improve education have been around for decades, if not centuries; and they will undoubtedly be around as long as thoughtful people have the courage, creativity, and vision to look for better ways of solving the endless array of problems that a changing culture and society places on the doorsteps of the school. But amidst all of the restructuring efforts, there are some things that constantly must be brought to the attention of reformers.

You don't develop the potential of a budding young concert pianist or composer by providing him or her with ordinary music classes for one or two hours a week. You don't produce future Thomas Edisons or Marie Curies by forcing them to spend large

amounts of their science and mathematics classes tutoring students who don't understand the material. A student who is tutoring others in a cooperative learning situation in mathematics may refine some of his or her basic skill processes, but this type of situation does not provide the level of challenge necessary for the most advanced types of involvement in the subject.

You don't prepare a young man or woman to become a world class athlete by keeping him or her in regular gym classes and by not allowing him or her to compete against other youngsters who can provide appropriate levels of challenge. When a high school tennis player is fighting it out with an opponent in practice or in a championship game, he or she is competing like hell, but s/he is also refining his/her skills and pushing his/her talent to the upper limit of its potential.

You don't develop world leaders such as Martin Luther King, Golda Meir, and Mahatma Gandhi by having them practice basic skills over and over again or by reiterating mundane concepts that they can undoubtedly learn faster than all of their schoolmates and, in some cases, even many of their teachers.

Talent development is the "business" of our field, and we must never lose sight of this goal, regardless of the direction that reform efforts may take.

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