

*Rethinking Curriculum, Instruction, and Assessment in Gifted  
Education at the End of the Millennium*

**Dr. James Borland**

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The following is the abridged version of Dr. James Borland's keynote address at the [Second National Curriculum Network Conference](#), 1997.

The goal of our educational efforts--and our field's central purpose--is to effect appropriate modifications in the curriculum of gifted students so that their education will come closer to meeting their educational needs and so we can come closer to meeting our educational obligations to them. All of the other issues that occupy much of our time--issues associated with identification and assessment, with the virtues and liabilities of pull-out programs of self-contained classes and the like--are derivative of and attendant upon the issue of curriculum.

In my experience at least, a lot of what is offered under the heading of enrichment for gifted students is not worth anybody's time. This is not a new or original observation. In 1988, in the *Journal for the Education of the Gifted*, Robert Sawyer, then of the Talent Identification Program at Duke University, published an article entitled "In Defense of Academic Rigor." In this article he excoriates much of what passes for curriculum in gifted education, such things as enrichment units based on the study of gnomes and Teddy bears and kits and games masquerading as curricula. Sawyer has put his finger on a serious problem, and this is the trivialization of gifted education curricula that, in my opinion, is too prevalent in our schools.

There are a number of reasons why this is the case. One is the lack of scope and sequence in the typical gifted education curriculum. No one has taken the program seriously enough to sit down and think about what these students need that they are not receiving in the regular curriculum. But the fact that the students do need something that the regular curriculum is not providing is, after all, the only valid reason for the program's existence. We would never tolerate this in any other aspect of education.

School personnel need to look at the regular curriculum and at the needs of their gifted students and determine where the former is failing the latter. And then curricular goals need to be formulated that address the deficiencies in the core curriculum for gifted learners, and a scope and sequence of objectives, skills, and content needs to be formulated so that it is clear what gifted students will get out of their gifted program. The development of a curricular scope and sequence for a gifted program is an important aspect of curriculum policy and should be dealt with at the appropriate administrative level. Nothing less is acceptable if a true curriculum is to exist.

Another reason for the trivial nature of so much that passes as curriculum for gifted students is its separation from the core curriculum. This separation is often a given; in fact, it is often an administrative mandate in pull-out programs. Teachers of gifted students are frequently told

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explicitly not to "trespass on" or to anticipate the core curriculum, even to stay away from the content of the core disciplines altogether.

So, gifted students sit in pull-out programs, often in beanbag chairs (an essential item in gifted program budgets in the 1970s, it seemed), and become more creative, thinking on higher levels. However, while gifted kids are sitting in their beanbag chairs analyzing, synthesizing, and evaluating, it doesn't occur to too many people that these words, analyze, synthesize, and evaluate, are transitive verbs. One must analyze something, must synthesize something, must evaluate something. In other words, content is not irrelevant.

So, what have we done by creating a dominant program model that requires enrichment that is usually, by mandate, separate from the core curriculum and that very often focuses on thinking skills and personal characteristics of gifted students instead of the content of the core disciplines?

Differentiation should be in, not outside, the curricular core. . . . curriculum differentiation for gifted students should focus on expanded basic skills, which are those skills that grow out of the basic skills we expect all students to master. Tannenbaum (Tannenbaum, A. (1983). Gifted children. NY:Macmillan Publishing) argues that gifted individuals are producers, not merely consumers, of knowledge. The core basic skills that undergird our regular curricula are designed to make students effective consumers of knowledge. But for students to become producers of knowledge, they need more. These are the expanded basic skills, and, he asserts, they should be mandated and required for gifted students in the same way basic skills are required for other students.

What are these expanded basic skills, generically speaking? For the most part, they are those skills, and the related content, that relate to what might be called the "meta-level" of a discipline. By this I mean that aspect of a discipline that focuses on the discipline itself as a discipline, as a means of producing knowledge.

An example would be the field of historiography, which is, in part, the study of theories of history. If history, to simplify greatly, is the study of past people, events, trends, and the like, historiography is the study of how this study takes place and the meanings it generates. It represents a step back from, or a transcendence of, the actual material of the field to study how that material is produced and dealt with. If historians generate historical theories, historiographers generate theories of historical theories. All students need to know the facts and generalizations that historians produce. Gifted students, at least those potentially gifted in this discipline, should also study historiography, the way this knowledge is produced.