

Quo Vadis*, Gifted Education?
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**Where are you going or whither thou goest?*

Research suggests that the best predictor of future behavior is past behavior. Whether studying individuals or social groups, positive sustained change only occurs with great effort expended over a long period of time. If this is indeed so, then the future state of gifted education is likely to remain chaotic, defensive, and peripheral to public education unless we change the way we do business as a field. So what will it take to “break the mold,” to move the field to higher ground where connection, coherence, and centrality to the world of public education become the mantra?

I believe there are five dimensions of our work that must be addressed more fully than they have been in the past in order for positive change to occur.

Dimension #1

We need to help people move beyond perceptions of the field as elitist, to see it rather as a manifestation of diversity. The term “elitism” is slippery as it may be applied in several ways within education. Elitism is often associated with socio-economic privilege – the power elite described in a 1953 book by the sociologist Mills whereby the world of the top moneyed and social class floated through America, privileged by large estates, a network of city and country clubs across the country, and guaranteed entry to Ivy League institutions via private boarding schools. Mills’ vision of education as a part of this elitism in the country may have been well-founded at the time, but the GI Bill and subsequent access levers render this image of elitism less accurate: high SAT test scores (750+) coupled with high achievement and special high level performance in a given non-academic area have become the new basis for Ivy League entry. Since everyone considered must prove merit first, need-based scholarships are prevalent. While high socio-economic status still confers many privileges in our society, access to high quality

education is no longer limited to this group; advanced education opportunity continues to become more diverse at elite schools.

Elitism may also be seen as academic rationalism, the Adlerian version of curriculum.

In a book called *In Defense of Elitism*, the author called upon Americans to be honest about the goals we as society hold for our children, suggesting that we value the heritage of our past, comprised of studying the best quality products conceived of by man as a basis for transmitting values (which some term “elitist”). To move beyond past accomplishments of civilization, one must first know what they were and be able to operationalize the skills and habits of mind essential for innovation in any field based on them. All students then should be provided these “elitist” tools to create a better world. If an excellent education is synonymous with “elitism,” then why would we disparage the term?

More recently, standardized testing has been attacked as promoting “elitism” in education. Thus we have moved away from norm-referenced ability and achievement tests in many school districts to more criterion-based measures. In a desire to “level the playing field,” we often do not want to know how able our children are. We prefer to see them “like everyone else.” If tests are a part of elitism, then what underlies the test as messenger must also be considered elitist, namely individual differences especially if the individual difference is high intellectual ability. Yet is not education pursuing an agenda that purports to care about diversity – about racial/socio-economic, and gender-based differences? I sense there is a fundamental dishonesty about how we espouse to value diversity. Some types of diversity are positive; others are not. Intellectual diversity is given short shift in the rush to create “normalcy” within the society.

If we are serious about promoting diversity, then support for individual differences of all types should be the norm in schools and classrooms, not the exception. Inclusion classrooms would be well-staffed with specialists to support the range of student needs, or alternative settings would be used to guarantee optimal service delivery. Clearly, this is not the current state of affairs.

What can schools do to fight the charge of gifted education as elitist activity concomitant with promoting diversity?

1. Demonstrate that academic talent development is similar to arts and sports in respect to the need for advanced learning and practice by those who show interest, motivation, perseverance, and aptitude. (Would we seek to dismantle or choke off our sports or arts programs?)
2. Ensure that gifted education programs are truly rigorous – AP and IB are good secondary examples. (It is less clear what constitutes rigor in elementary and middle school programs.)
3. Focus on the students who need to be served by gifted programs (their profiles, their backgrounds, their readiness for more advanced learning). Giftedness in the abstract is always less appealing than in the concrete.
4. Just as the field must take a stand against charges of elitism, it also must embrace the concept of diversity in all of its manifestations. We must ensure that services and programs designed for gifted students be available to all students who could benefit from them, that test scores be balanced with human judgement about student capability in the process of identification and actual performance, and that mechanisms to increase minority and low SES student participation in gifted programs continue to be employed.

Dimension #2 Curriculum, Instruction, and Assessment

A second dimension to be addressed is the curriculum, instruction and assessment of classroom delivery. Schools need to recognize that adapting and tailoring curriculum, instruction, and assessment for their best students is a reflection of their own competency in honoring individual differences of any kind. Curriculum has always been the heart of gifted education. What works for gifted students at what stage of development continues to be the central problem in constructing effective programs for these students. As a field, we have been far too focused on the context for programs and not enough on the interventions, namely the curriculum, instruction, and assessment at the classroom level or the programmatic structures that will sustain

real learning at that level. Lack of sufficient planning has characterized the curriculum enterprise, with limited or no evidence in clarity of purpose, coherence in execution, or enough contact time necessary to accomplish the challenge.

The task would appear to be straightforward. We want to find students who show evidence of advanced development through multiple measures in one or more areas of domain-specific learning and provide them with the elements of sound programming through acceleration, enrichment, grouping, and personalized services delivered with deliberate attention to a strong curriculum base. As a result of such interventions over time, we hope to imbue students with creative and productive habits of mind that allow them to develop relevant products to demonstrate their advanced levels of learning in key domains, the path to professional productivity in worthwhile areas of human endeavor.

Part of effective planning requires that schools adopt a sense of clarity around what is to be taught and how it is to be delivered in order to achieve desired outcomes of such efforts. Using research-based models for constructing curriculum units has been found to be crucial for the gifted and an important part of an effective response. The Integrated Curriculum Model has been used here at William & Mary as an effective organizer for curriculum in all of the content areas, with deep implementation of the model in over 100 school districts in all 50 states and data suggesting that student learning is both significant and important in content-relevant higher level thinking processes as a result of unit intervention. The model posits, based on research in the field, that curriculum must be responsive to students' precocity, creativity, intensity, and hunger for meaningful learning. Thus it is organized around a central concept to deliver advanced

content within a structure of higher order thinking and problem solving which are then applied to the development of student-generated projects.

Also central to the enterprise of effective curriculum development for the gifted is the incorporation of features found in the national standards projects work and emerging from cognitive research— an emphasis on metacognition, connected learning, scaffolding through concept mapping, and stressing the development of habits of mind. Curriculum for the gifted must also pass through these state and national content standards, not go around them.

Alignment and articulation must occur at all levels to demonstrate the interaction of what all students need to know and where programs for the gifted should begin.

What can schools do?

We know how to design curriculum units that work yet many times lack faithful implementation procedures that provide needed flexibility in school settings. Thus schools need to adopt: flexibility in use of time frames (more time on some tasks/less time on others), flexibility in overall learning pace and rate for advanced learners, and flexibility in grouping that guarantees minimum contact time for the gifted. Attention must also be paid to faithful implementation of packaged curriculum that works over teacher-developed “last minute” lessons. Assessment must become more diversified to include performance-based and portfolio products.

Dimension #3—Program Development

A third dimension that needs attention is program development. Because the heart of gifted programs rests with the students and their teachers in the learning enterprise of the classroom, the

mechanisms of program development and evaluation must be in place and ongoing at both classroom and school and district level, in order for improvement in the overall gifted program to occur.

An annual plan for program services must be developed; implemented in all relevant schools within a district; studied at the end of the year for strengths, weaknesses, and unanticipated results, and then a new plan of action developed based on study findings. At the same time, classroom curriculum also needs to be considered annually, using a similar process for planned improvement. This is a simple process, but in my experience one that is not routinely occurring in gifted programs. Planning does not translate into execution routines, nor is program implementation set up to be studied as a regular course of learning how programs actually work so that real program improvement can occur.

Having evaluated three state gifted programs, six local district programs, and two specialized schools for the gifted over the past seven years, there have been consistent serious gaps observed in this basic program development cycle. The most serious ones appear to be:

- Curriculum development work needs to be done in the form of macro-documents (K-12 frameworks and scope and sequence charts) and micro-documents (quality units of study)
- Instructional delivery is uneven and frequently weak, based on the lack of trained specialists and a match between teacher and assignment.
- Curriculum alignment is lacking both to state standards as well as to AP and IB programs.
- Program articulation is missing; many programs still are bounded at grades 3-5 with no downward or upward linkages.

- Student impact data are lacking on an annual and a longitudinal basis.
- Lack of a sustained system of guidance and counseling prevails.

What can schools do?

- Create and implement interlocking systems of operations that work to serve gifted students' needs in a coherent way. Curriculum and instruction must link to staff development to teacher evaluation. Curriculum and instruction must link to instructional leadership responsibilities for monitoring implementation by principals and curriculum coordinators.
- Develop key curriculum & planning documents in order to provide meaningful program development which can then be transformed to student learning that can then be assessed and quality judgments made about its efficacy.

Only then can data-driven decisions be made about gifted programs.

Dimension #4 – Professional Development

A fourth area that needs to be addressed is the landscape of professional development. The importance of professional development in the world of K-12 schools is at an all time high for several reasons. First, it continues to be the primary methodology through which teachers update their skills and new teachers are socialized to the priorities of a particular school and/or district. Secondly, professional development is the major mechanism for implementing the curriculum reform agenda of recent state standards and assessment practices. Finally, in an age of teacher shortages and concomitant alternative licensure programs, all schools must have a sufficiently broad professional development thrust to prepare novitiates to education “on the job.”

New developments in gifted education also have presaged the need for strong attention to this component of program development. Many current models of delivery in gifted education involve regular classroom teachers to a great extent, either as sole providers or as partners or collaborators with specially trained teachers of the gifted. Moreover, cluster programs in the regular classroom have become an equally viable option to pullout programs in many locales. And inclusion has led to the return of gifted students to the regular classroom or to merely remaining in them.

Yet current research and evaluation data have continued to suggest that regular classroom teachers are ill-prepared to differentiate for gifted students in the regular classroom to any extent.

Since teachers are the gatekeepers of student learning, their knowledge, skills, and attitudes matter. Recent studies have demonstrated all too well the consequences of ineffective teaching over three year periods in elementary schools, and the consequences of underprepared teachers being assigned more readily to poor schools. Studies have also shown the effectiveness of high-level content-based practices in teaching all subjects as well as the importance of teaching thinking and problem solving skills. Yet teacher preparation programs for our best students are left to the haphazardness of conference attendance and spotty staff development, based on teacher interests rather than programmatic needs.

We need to be clearer about the needs for teacher preparation in this field, working with teachers from basic functioning in management skills, content-based pedagogy, and classroom organization to advanced functioning where they become master teachers and coaches/mentors

for other teachers; for teachers of the gifted, complex skills like higher level thinking, problem-solving, and metacognition are essential and take time to develop effectively. Staff development activities should lead to evidence of positive student learning changes over time rather than short term evidence of success as judged by perceptions of participants who focus on the speaker and not the implications of the message for improved practice.

We need to ask the following questions about our staff development efforts:

1. What knowledge and skills do we want educators to acquire about gifted students and their learning? Certainly they need to know an arsenal of different strategies such as higher order questioning and problem-based learning among others and be able to implement curriculum models addressing these strategies.
2. Under what delivery mode will educators best acquire these understandings (e.g., study groups, workshops, action research, mentoring)?
3. What organizational support structures are in place to facilitate change? Are adequate resources available for classroom implementation? Will implementation be monitored? How? Is the climate supportive of experimentation?

These questions matter in judging the adequacy of professional development efforts and the depth of penetration achieved to affect student learning.

What can schools do?

- Select teachers based on evidence of advanced teaching competencies using portfolio data that include videotapes of teaching with gifted students.

- Develop a multiyear staff development plan that assesses teacher growth on the job through multiple means including observation, coaching, and student performance.

Dimension #5—Leadership

The final dimension of work in this field that needs attention is leadership. There was a time when state and local leaders in gifted education were carefully cultivated and trained in its tenets. This is no longer the case, with much attrition of leadership and split positions at these levels of programming at a time in our history when we need exemplary leadership more than ever before. Program and school leaders need to know about quality gifted programs and how to implement them.

What makes leadership in gifted education so challenging today is that leaders must embrace the paradox of working in schools where core educational values are competing as never before, with values such as equity and excellence, standardization and personalization, tradition and innovation, and modern and postmodern paradigms fighting for supremacy.

Thus there is a need to maintain a stance of supporting flexibility for individual needs in the delivery of standards for all, working on appropriate assessment models for gifted and talented while acknowledging the role of state assessments in documenting proficiencies. There is also a need to be advocating for greater access to gifted programs for underrepresented and underserved populations while staying focused on program excellence. We need to be providing program services that have proven successful in the past while experimenting with promising new approaches. Finally, we must be willing to acknowledge the reality of moving programs a

step forward only to lurch back two as incremental changes still trump systemic reform in most locales.

Thus leaders in gifted education must reflect on and display multiple leadership styles:

- adapting different lenses based on the dynamics of people and events: moving from taskmaster to pastor to politician to communicator of shared meanings
- (being able to move) people to perform at levels beyond their past capacity
- being adept at creating interdisciplinary work groups who are mobilized around a connected, shared goal, and
- having the sense and will to take needed action on behalf of a program.

What can schools do?:

- Select program leaders who are schooled in administration as well as gifted education.
- Select leaders who show flexibility in addressing standards.
- Select leaders who demonstrate flexibility in implementing accountability systems such as accelerating state assessment schedules for gifted learners.

These five dimensions then – 1) support for individual differences as a facet of diversity, 2) curriculum, instruction and assessment that is research-based, 3) systemic program development, 4) professional development that leads to student growth, and 5) leadership that understands the necessity for embracing contradiction – all are needed together for sufficient traction in moving gifted programs forward.

Cicero once said that “A people is not just any collection of human beings brought together in any sort of way but an assemblage of people...associated in an agreement with respect to justice and a partnership for the common good.” The field of gifted education constitutes such an assemblage, brought together in a covenant of service to and for high ability learners. It is we together who will change the future of gifted education. I know we are up to the task.