

A Classroom Full of Gifts

Jemma Giddings

Lisa Sheehy

The working definition of "giftedness" mutates with the educational and political environment of the culture in which we live. Originally based solely on Intelligence Quotient testing (Weinberg, 1989), the concept of giftedness has proven itself much too diverse and complicated for such a narrow perspective. "Decades of experience" (Gallagher, 1991, p. 14), which have brought advancements from E. Paul Torrance's (1962) studies in creativity to Howard Gardner's (1983) Multiple Intelligences research, have compelled us to embrace the idea that intelligence and giftedness transcend such a limited definition. Based on such studies, many states have adopted broader definitions and more extensive identification processes, in the hopes that such modifications will enable more accurate identification of those students with exceptional gifts. While such intentions are laudable, we perceive them as barriers, distracting our educational system from the more central issue of how to best develop the gifts and potential gifts of each student in our classrooms.

Using artificial, contrived methods like standardized multiple choice testing, our educational system seeks to identify those students with the potential to become the creators, leaders, and great thinkers in our society. Based on perceived potential, we predetermine the academic needs of those we select, instead of placing all students in environments in which their academic strengths and needs will reveal themselves. By providing enriching environments that illuminate the gifts and abilities of our students, we can integrate

Jemma Giddings teaches mathematics at South Gwinnett High School in Snellville, GA. She received her M.Ed. in Mathematics Education from the University of Georgia. She is interested in gifted education, girls in mathematics, and gender equity. Her e-mail address is jandjgiddings@mindspring.com

Lisa Sheehy teaches mathematics at Gainesville High School in Gainesville, GA. She is working on her Ph.D. in Mathematics Education at the University of Georgia. She is currently studying cooperative learning from a social constructivist perspective. Her e-mail address is sheehylisa@hotmail.com

the identification of those with high ability into a natural setting and then provide the differentiation their specific gifts necessitate. As educators, we need to reassess the linear process of identification of gifted students followed by differentiation, as well as the accompanying question of why there is a need to label certain students as gifted.

Reassessing the Identification Process

Answers to the question of why we need the gifted label previously focused on the importance of allowing gifted students to reach their full potential by providing them with special services and support. However, very few students, labeled gifted or not, reach their full potential in the structure of current schools and classrooms. When we begin to examine the common responses to the question of how to better serve students who have been labeled as gifted, we find that the methods being suggested and used for gifted education are the same ones currently being promoted as reasonable and vital methods in all classrooms for all students. The practice of labeling students as 'gifted' or 'not-gifted' often propagates the idea that creative, enriching methods in the classroom are reserved for an elite few. Such methods are not for high ability students alone; they are powerful tools that can aid the intellectual development of a wide range of students.

This is not to say that we should abandon the concept of a differentiated curriculum; students must be placed in stimulating environments. Whatever the students' strengths and weaknesses, there are many cases in which differentiation by homogeneous grouping will help to provide the necessary challenges. Nevertheless, how we identify the needs and gifts of these and other students must be integrally woven into the tapestry of our classrooms. Tannenbaum (1991) urged us to "stop wasting precious time in search of simplistic solutions to an intricate problem, namely determining what contributes to the making of a gifted person" (p. 28). Sternberg (1991) stated,

We need to teach students to make the most of their strengths and find ways around or ways to improve their weaknesses: what we can do is help students more effectively exploit their intellectual abilities at the same time that they increase those abilities in need of enhancement. (p. 53)

Several alternative models for the development of a process where identification is intertwined with general enrichment exist (See Renzulli's (1986) Enrichment Triad/Revolving Door Model and Tannenbaum's (1986) Sieve). The key to this shift from focusing on testing and labeling to focusing on student development lies in restructuring classrooms and in redefining the role of the classroom teacher.

Restructuring the Classroom

The current, traditional classroom often revolves around the concept of competition. Our school systems are set up to differentiate and categorize students, often at an early age, by ability level and test performance. From the assignment of grades, class rankings, timed drills, and organized games and events, students learn quickly that they are in competition with their classmates. Students are well aware that, at the end of the term, they will be assigned grades based on how well they fared compared to their classmates. Whether intended or not, the goal of the student becomes to outperform her or his classmates. Labeling children as gifted seems to grow naturally in this atmosphere. Students must score in the ninety-fifth percentile on standardized tests of aptitude in order to be considered the best and the brightest. In such an environment, children's gifts appear to lie in the ability to outdo other students rather than in an individually demonstrated talent in a specific area or field.

If we are to follow the advice of Sternberg (1991) and work toward developing the potential of all students, we need to shift the focus away from competition. By doing so, we will help students to realize that the truest form of learning is discovering and developing their own strengths and ideas. Our classrooms can become places where a student competes only with herself, and classmates are viewed as partners in the learning process. Through active communication and the sharing of ideas, students can learn to value, appreciate, and even draw on the strengths of their peers. Our classrooms must become open, cooperative, sup-

portive environments. We can encourage collaboration by centering lessons around investigation and the creation of new ideas. Steering curricula away from rote memorization of facts and toward the development of students' philosophies, conjectures, and discoveries will further facilitate an atmosphere of cooperation. When classroom environments begin to foster this type of development, the need to predetermine which students have the potential to excel will diminish. "Gifts"—encouraged by teachers and supported by peers—will develop naturally.

The National Council of Teachers of Mathematics (NCTM) proposed standards for curricula that incorporate the above philosophies and environment in the mathematics classroom. The authors of the *Standards* (NCTM, 1989) conveyed a vision for the mathematics classroom that, if adapted and adopted by all classroom teachers, could forever alter the methods by which we identify students' talents. The *Standards* call for curriculum and teaching methods that incorporate problem solving, reasoning, connections, and communication (p. iii). The goal is for all students to develop

Mathematical Power: an individual's ability to explore, conjecture and reason logically, as well as the ability to use a variety of mathematical methods effectively to solve non-routine problems. This notion is based on the recognition of mathematics as more than a collection of concepts and skills to be mastered; it includes methods of investigating and reasoning, means of communication, and notions of context (p. 5).

This philosophy about mathematics is one that is in line with the philosophy of gifted education; the difference is that that NCTM believes "all students need access to a coherent, challenging mathematics curriculum," (1998, p. 26) not just those labeled as gifted. As classrooms and curricula are transformed to be more open and creative, enrichment and exploratory opportunities could prove to be a threshold for more genuine gifted behavior to surface. Perhaps we will see giftedness surface in a wider range of students, without the exclusivity that often accompanies a gifted program.

Redefining Teacher Roles

This endeavor not only requires the restructuring of the classroom; it also demands that we as teachers redefine our roles and adopt new expectations for our students.

Students will rise to the expectations that teachers set; whether these expectations are spoken or not, they are communicated to students. If the teacher expects to rank students by performance, students will adopt roles accordingly. Refocusing our expectations to applaud individual strengths and improvement will provide us with a motivation to work toward a more student-centered classroom environment.

We can rise to this challenge by working to become facilitators of learning rather than dispensers of knowledge. Developing lessons that encourage investigations and discoveries will help foster a spirit of cooperation among students instead of an atmosphere of competition. We need to ask open-ended questions and allow students the opportunity to be creative, despite the fact that this may alter the end result of a lesson. The teacher, as a motivator, encourager, and facilitator instead of an authority and director, has the potential to encourage collaboration and divergent thinking in her classroom, making creative and cooperative conversations the norm rather than the exception. When we as teachers rethink our position and adopt new roles in the classroom, we increase the opportunities for students to discover and develop their own talents. Students' needs to compare themselves to their classmates will diminish, because each will have the opportunity to develop herself to her fullest potential.

The belief that we should not label certain students as gifted is not an issue of equity at the expense of excellence (Colangelo & Davis, 1991). Rather, it is a realization of the potential in all students, not just those who have been targeted by this generation, with all its idiosyncratic beliefs and values, as the leaders and thinkers of the next. It has been argued that the drastic measure of eliminating the label, and hence the differentiated program, will promote complacency in the classroom. The current system, however, perpetuates complacency, mediocrity, and frustration. It does not do this by the veritable statement that all students are gifted in some way; rather, it does so by maintaining the disenfranchising, undemocratic habit of creating an elite, relatively hegemonic group of future leaders, while training as sheepish followers an immense population of squashed individuals who may not be given the opportunities to live up to their full

potentials. When we accept that all children have the inherent need to more fully develop themselves, the compulsion to label children will be eclipsed by the desire to facilitate self-awareness and self-identification. Gifted education research can then be applied to the development of teaching methods and curricula that challenge all students to find and develop their individual gifts.

References

- Colangelo, N., & Davis, G. A. (1991). Introduction and historical overview. In N. Colangelo & G. A. Davis (Eds.), *Handbook of gifted education* (pp. 3-13). Needham Heights, MA: Allyn and Bacon.
- Gallagher, J. J. (1991). Issues in the education of gifted students. In N. Colangelo & G. A. Davis (Eds.), *Handbook of gifted education* (pp. 14-26). Needham Heights, MA: Allyn and Bacon.
- Gardner, H. (1983). *Frames of mind: The theory of multiple intelligences*. New York: Basic
- National Council of Teachers of Mathematics. (1989). *Curriculum and evaluation standards for school mathematics*. Reston, VA: National Council of Teachers of Mathematics.
- National Council of Teachers of Mathematics. (1998). *Principles and standards for school mathematics: Discussion draft*. Reston, VA: National Council of Teachers of Mathematics.
- Renzulli, J. S., & Reis, S. M. (1986). The enrichment triad/revolving door model: A schoolwide plan for the development of creative productivity. In J. S. Renzulli (Ed.), *Systems and models for developing programs for the gifted and talented* (pp. 217-266). Mansfield Center, CT: Creative Learning Press, Inc.
- Sternberg, R. J. (1991). Giftedness according to the triarchic theory of human intelligence. In N. Colangelo & G. A. Davis (Eds.), *Handbook of gifted education* (pp. 45-54). Needham Heights, MA: Allyn and Bacon.
- Tannenbaum, A. J. (1986). The enrichment matrix model. In J. S. Renzulli (Ed.), *Systems and models for developing programs for the gifted and talented* (pp. 392-428). Mansfield Center, CT: Creative Learning Press, Inc.
- Tannenbaum, A. J. (1991). The social psychology of giftedness. In N. Colangelo & G. A. Davis (Eds.), *Handbook of gifted education* (pp. 27-44). Needham Heights, MA: Allyn and Bacon.
- Torrance, E. P. (1962). *Guiding creative talent*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall.
- Weinberg, R. (1989). Intelligence and IQ: Landmark issues and great debates. *American Psychologist*, 44, 98-104.