
Introduction

Joan Franklin Smutny

Gifted programs have the potential to change lives. This may seem an exaggeration to some, but we, the authors, have seen it. We have watched bored and apathetic students reenergized by learning a new subject, exploring a fresh theory or angle, or testing a hypothesis they discovered in a gifted program. We have seen artistic and imaginative children, neglected in the regular classroom, come to life in a place where they can use their creative strengths in art, creative writing, theater, and dance. When developed with care and nurtured at each step, gifted programs bring hope and the promise of new possibility to talented children who need this kind of intervention.

The many attempts of researchers and of society to define the word *gifted* are too numerous and varied to explore in any detail in this Introduction. However, this seemingly innocuous definition is the most important philosophical underpinning of any gifted program. Perhaps the best identifier of the gifted individual relates not so much to what degree or type of gift he or she has *received* but to what degree or type of gift this child passionately desires *to give*. Gifted children are almost uniformly zealous in their aspirations to share knowledge and understanding gained with others and with the world. This may find manifestation in the child who can't stop talking to everyone about dinosaurs, the child who cries over reports of unrest in the evening news broadcast, or the seeming perfectionism of the child who has invested himself or herself heavily in his or her work. Emerson's (1844) quip, "The only gift is a portion of thyself," rings true among these children and young people.

Gifted programs allow gifted children to share their insights and talents—*to be gifted*—in ways their usual classrooms rarely can. The result of this is lasting satisfaction and improved self-esteem on the part of the children, accompanied by an even greater thirst for future achievement. It is this facet of *giving* that explains why so many gifted children find themselves transformed by programs.

2 Designing and Developing Programs for Gifted Students

Much has been written on gifted classes. This book, however, focuses on gifted *programs*. The distinction is important. A *gifted program* might be defined as the following:

A class or set of classes spanning a time frame less than a school year, offered to children as an option beyond what is available in the regular classroom and in which students of similar talent are grouped together to the exclusion of other students, in order to allow (a) the optimization of educational outcomes through communicative spillovers or synergies across students and between teachers and students, (b) the teaching of more in-depth or accelerated material to students *as a group*, and (c) the provision of an environment where scholarship and other educational outcomes such as socialization are complements, not substitutes.

A program for gifted children must be exclusionary—namely, it must emphasize grouping of like-talented students. The exclusion may be done using a variety of different criteria, including by self-selection, but it must be done at some level. This is because it is grouping that essentially provides the *raison d'être* for gifted programs of all sorts. Both theory and evidence document that high-ability students receive greater benefits, or “spillovers,” from having high-ability peers than do low-ability students. Under this condition, the talent sorting that programs for the gifted provide offers an improvement on the aggregate outcomes of an educational system. “Spillovers” in talent are well documented and psychologically based, and the chapter in this volume by Maria Sabatella discusses the psychological literature in greater detail. Moreover, in the most recent study on the subject, Hoxby (2000) used a very large panel of data on Texas elementary school students to provide further evidence on the size of talent spillovers, suggesting that a 1% improvement in peer talent levels generates between .1% and .4% improvements in any individual student’s educational outcomes. Most of the empirical research on this subject has necessarily focused on test scores as educational outcomes, but it is not difficult to imagine that equally large or larger spillovers exist for the far broader outcomes that genuinely determine student achievement, success, and satisfaction in education. Those interested in a more detailed survey of theoretical and empirical work on grouping may wish to consult Kulik and Kulik (1991).

Both gifted programs and gifted classes within school settings are predicated on the benefits of grouping. In addition to these effects, however, programs also feature some other benefits not generally available in classes. Programs offer the opportunity for in-depth, rigorous, and intensive study of particular subjects of interest to gifted children in ways that even gifted classes within school settings often cannot. According to *The Gifted Kid’s Survival Guide*, the number one “great gripe” of gifted kids is that “the stuff we do in school is too easy and it’s boring” (Galbraith, 1983). Gifted children love to take hold of an idea and wring it dry like a wet towel, extracting every possible insight it offers. Where the regular classroom offers a limited

investigation of issues unimportant to children, gifted programs allow students to vigorously seek fundamental truths about the questions they ask, overcoming the doubt or mistrust in themselves as scholars and thinkers that LeVine and Kitano (1998) identified as a primary stumbling block for gifted children. Many researchers have identified the opportunity to pursue their own fervent learning interests as the most useful educational strategy of gifted individuals (e.g., Clark, 1992; Cohen, 1998). Moreover, the regular mixed-talent classroom must often focus solely on method, drill, and repetition, whereas the motivation, interest, and high ability of gifted students allow for a program that focuses on application, offering opportunities for higher-level thinking, transdisciplinary study (Drake, 1998), and real-world “Type III” investigations (Renzulli & Reis, 1986). Thus, gifted programs offer students a break from an often dreary experience in school, freeing them from the lockhold imposed by a classroom setting based on state and district standards that all students must meet. Gifted children are then allowed to share their talents more deeply, and they often take away from the experience new insights into how they can continue to give of themselves on a larger level after the end of the program.

Gifted programs also provide students with an opportunity to network with children who are similarly talented but raised in different environments. The primary critique of grouping, and hence of gifted education, is that it may involve an “ivory tower” effect, wherein children who have been grouped together all their lives never learn to communicate with others outside the group. Galbraith (1983) stated it more bluntly: “Myth #6: If GTs [gifted and talented] are grouped together, they’ll become snobs or elitist” (p. 21). Gifted programs bring students out of their regularly scheduled classrooms—whether gifted, differentiated, or undifferentiated—and place them in new settings, with new teachers, new subjects, and, typically, new peers. The result is higher achievement, not only in academic pursuits but also in interpersonal communication and relations. Because gifted children desire above all to share their talents, the development of communication skills is highly important to their long-term development and potential.

For a particular program to achieve these deep and broad benefits to students and to society, we must remember the practical considerations of development and implementation. Although the authors represented in this book all bring different areas of expertise to this subject, we are united in our recognition of the following:

1. Gifted programs should not simply offer enrichment but a cohesive, rigorous, creative, and in-depth course of study.
2. Gifted programs should use the best possible teachers in the subjects offered.
3. Gifted programs should accommodate children with different learning styles, cultures, and socioeconomic backgrounds.

4 Designing and Developing Programs for Gifted Students

4. Gifted programs should counsel children and families who need help with emotional, social, and other problems commonly associated with giftedness.

Many different learning experiences fall under the definition of a “gifted program.” This book offers examples of several. Summer camp for highly gifted mathematics students, weekend poetry courses, afterschool theater settings, and an infinite variety of other offerings might all be classified as gifted programs. This book makes no attempt to be exhaustive; it does not need to be. We could have presented a detailed blueprint or a set of formulas that everyone should follow, yet this would ignore all the differences that exist between programs and the communities they serve—differences in philosophy, in resources, and in populations. Our aim instead has been to present the basic elements and operating principles that make gifted programs effective, creative, and continuous. It is our hope that you, the readers, will find in this volume the inspiration and practical guidance you need to start your own gifted programs or at least to apply the ideas here to programs you already have. Beyond this, it is up to you to assess what works best in your experience and how you should approach each phase of program development based on the resources available and the people involved.

Given the relatively low priority placed on gifted education and the inadequate services most of these children receive in the United States and abroad, gifted programs help fill a void for the nation’s gifted students. To help them become strong leaders for the future, program developers of all kinds need to grapple with the larger question: How can we do more for gifted children? This book provides many answers, but perhaps the most important is that the people involved in different kinds of gifted programs should do more to work together. This would mean not merely supporting each other’s efforts but creating partnerships that would benefit the children who need more than an occasionally stimulating class. By themselves, programs offer only a part-time solution, but giftedness is a full-time condition. Together, however, they could create a more comprehensive and systematic approach to gifted education and could reach far more children.

Another question that program directors and coordinators need to consider is the following: How can these programs ensure that the work they do for gifted children *endures*? One way is by doing more for parents. Teachers and administrators often shy away from involving parents because they have a reputation for being “pushy” or demanding. Unfortunately, a few difficult parents can give the whole population a bad name. Because most gifted children live under the care of their parents, I have always felt that programs should include them in the services they offer. These services may include parent seminars, counseling (formal or informal), and regular communications about opportunities and/or sources that could benefit gifted children and their families.

Another way gifted programs can have lasting effect is through career education for gifted students. Often, gifted programming ends with junior high school. In high school, advanced placement classes offered for bright

students on the college preparatory track replace what used to be special programs for the gifted. The problem with this is that, although gifted students may have an accelerated and more complex course of study, they lack the opportunity to investigate ideas and possibilities for their future. Instead, they follow the track laid out for them without any time to explore and experiment with career options. A whole other set of issues assails gifted people from high school through college. Some gifted students drop out of college to drift from one thing to the next; others follow a program they think they're supposed to follow (or that a parent wants them to be in), only to change paths several times in the middle of their college years; and still other students refuse to enter college because they feel so fed up with formal schooling they would rather learn in some new context, but they're not sure where or how.

Gifted programs can help gifted young people explore different fields, plan for future development based on their talents and interests, and field-test their choices through internships and/or visits to businesses, courts, museums, labs, universities, nature centers, studios, performing arts rehearsals, and so on. Because of their talents, gifted people look like they know what they're doing. But the appearance of the self-assured gifted young person can be misleading. Inside, that individual may be struggling with some life decisions that require the guidance and support of an older, more experienced person. Parents cannot always perform this task because in many instances, parents find it difficult to separate themselves from their own preconceived ideas about what their children should do.

Gifted programs can make a distinct difference in the lives of many gifted children who become lost or misdirected in their late high school or early college years, when they have to search the deeper, more unpredictable waters of life on their own. By supporting parents and offering career guidance to gifted students, programs can make their contribution a more lasting one. Parents will discover new ways to advocate for their children. On their side, gifted children and young people will find in their programs adults who can help them identify what fields they most enjoy and advise them on the steps they need to take to get where they want to go. Counseling will help talented young people focus on *their own interests*, rather than on what they think those interests should be. Thus, it is highly important that teachers in gifted programs have specific and extensive training in issues relating to giftedness and the problems it raises in children.

Gifted programs are a lot of work and often require great vision and resiliency to sustain. Most of us have developed strong convictions about their potential and long-term value for gifted children, especially in the face of budgetary cuts and the deepening neglect of these students' special needs. When developed and managed properly, gifted programs can create changes that endure beyond the length of a program. Children can begin to take hold of their own talents when they gain confidence in themselves and their own interests. Families can assume a stronger leadership role in advocating for the needs of their children once they understand what practical steps they can take and how to take them.

6 Designing and Developing Programs for Gifted Students

As researchers and practitioners in the field, we have pooled our insights and experience to create a book that explores how gifted programs work, what they can do for families, and the steps others have taken to develop successful programs in many different environments. The book brings together the ideas of numerous workers in the field of gifted education with many years of experience in programs; it is not ideological, though the authors represent a variety of different viewpoints and backgrounds. Thus, the book should be of use not only to those familiar with all the issues of educational research but also to the nonspecialist parent, teacher, or administrator. Some chapters are more technical than others, but all are accessible to the widest range of individuals who care deeply about gifted children and desire to do more for them.

Gifted children have inherent in them the desire to continually raise their level of giving to the world. We are facilitators of that desire.

*Stand
tall
and
proud.
Perhaps
I too
should be
A blade
of grass
in the sun.
You do
not belong
yet you exist.*

You and me.

*The wind
bends
your back
until its will
is yours.
But you
return
to stand
once more
in the shadow
Just like
I have done.*

—Liliana, Grade 8