

Do we know if gifted children are being served appropriately?

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Before I begin to answer this question, let me put it into a context that is current: The movie *Titanic* had become the most profitable movie of all time. Yet, oddly, *Titanic* is a story of a mistake. The makers of the movie pulled it back from a July 4, 1997, release because it wasn't ready for "prime time," and the movie itself is based on a historic accident that cost many people very dearly.

In some ways, I question whether gifted child education is on a similar route to the *Titanic*. For remember: the *Titanic*, when it sank, was on the right course; it just didn't know when to shift to a new one to avoid oblivion.

My answer to the question of whether we know if gifted children are being served appropriately goes back to a question often asked, wrongly, by parents and educators interested in doing the best for their children. They ask, "Does my school district have a gifted program?" A much more informed question would be, "In what ways are gifted children's needs accommodated within this school district?" Remember, gifted education is not a place, and asking if a gifted program exists relegates it as so.

The much more complex question is whether or not there is intellectual meaningfulness existing in schools so that every child, whatever the limit or extent of his or her gifts, is challenged and encouraged to pursue the potential of his or her own possibilities. The barometer by which we measure this intellectual meaningfulness is very individualistic and idiosyncratic, just as is our own idea of comfort and fun. For example, some people find camping enjoyable, while others think that "roughing it" is a Marriott Hotel without an indoor pool.

So, rather than answer the question of whether we know if a school's curriculum is optimal for the gifted child's development, it would be better to pose these questions to the parties involved:

*** To the school principal:** "What provisions are in place within the school district to take advantage of children's gifts and talents?" and "How do you know they are being implemented properly?"

*** To the classroom teacher:** "What activities and curriculum options are available that respect the depth and complexity of gifted students' thinking?" and "In what ways are gifted children allowed and encouraged to interact with one another?"

*** To the child:** "What are you learning about or what are you now doing that you didn't know before?" and "In what ways are you allowed and encouraged to pursue your interests and passions?"

Only when these questions are answered can school personnel say to parents, "Yes, we are trying to do the best that we can for your gifted child."

Part II: What Is the Worth of the Pull-Out Program?

On this point, I will not equivocate. The bottom line is that as long as resource rooms continue to be the preferred method of addressing the needs of gifted students at the elementary school level, there will be no perceived need for classroom teachers to take the responsibility that is rightfully theirs: to accommodate their curriculum and instruction to address the needs of gifted students.

However, unless school boards and administrators are willing to "put their money where their philosophies are" and hire the additional personnel that are required to do inclusion right, then I advocate maintaining some level of distinct service for gifted students, even the much maligned (by me) resource room. For although the pull-out program leads folks to believe that gifted children are just "gifted on Tuesdays," I'd rather that children be seen as gifted one day each week than no day at all.

If inclusion is to be done at all, it must be done right. The children deserve no less. And unless we are willing to admit that such broadly-based, inclusionary services are going to cost more money and require more expertise, not less, I'm afraid inclusion will remain more of an excuse than a viable option, for both gifted children and special education students.

The time, though, has never been better to make this attempt. The way that most resource rooms operate in today's schools, they seldom relate to the tenets of the school reform movement, where everything in a school is connected to everything else. They are **apart from** not **a part of** a child's total school experience.

Resource room teachers are so busy teaching their students that they seldom have time to communicate legitimately with classroom teachers in coordinating curriculum and activities that allow gifted children to see the relationships that exist between being “gifted on Tuesdays” and what happens during the rest of the school week.

An inclusive climate and structure, if done right with the appropriate personnel, can bridge this yawning gap in the gifted child’s education.

One final point about inclusionary programs for gifted children needs to be made: inclusion works, but it is not the “one size fits all” program model that some propose. Thus, we have got to find ways to provide for meeting the unique **social and emotional needs** of gifted students within the inclusive school environment. Also, the needs of highly gifted children will need more intensive attention than inclusive settings are generally able to offer.