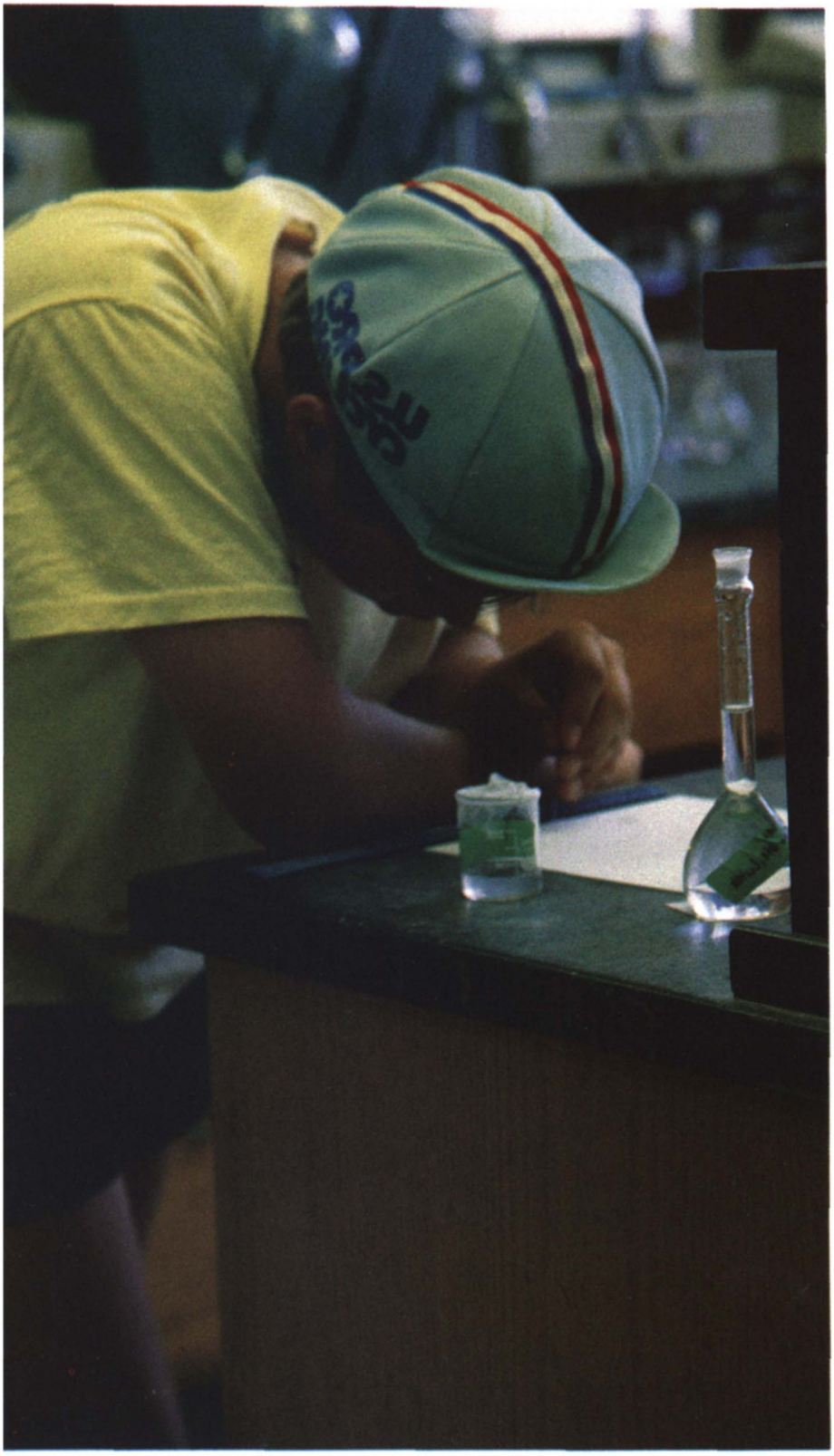
PROGRESS IN GIFTED EDUCATION — Every



As we enter the last decade of the twentieth century, it is a time when one can feel satisfied about the progress being made on behalf of gifted students. Let me highlight some of our accomplishments. Foremost on such a list must be the success of legislative actions at both the national and state levels, resulting in gifted programs increasingly becoming mandated, our federal office for the gifted being reestablished, a multi-million dollar, federally funded research center initiated in 1990, and state-supported governor's schools or similar institutions becoming growing phenomena (13 states have initiated residential high schools; many offer summer programs). In another domain but not independent of the above accomplishments, there is a trend towards increasing services to growing numbers of gifted students. Regional talent searches, for example, are identifying and providing services to over 100,000 intellectually gifted seventh- or eighth-grade students each year, while the Advanced Placement (AP) program is offered, in the form of courses, by 21,000 secondary schools. Concern for the gifted is also increasing as judged by record breaking attendance at national conventions focused on gifted students and the American Psychological Association (APA) sponsoring a symposium series devoted to the gifted. Research also is on the ascent, with the number of high quality research reports appearing at an ever increasing rate. The prestigious *Journal of Educational Psychology* even devoted a special issue to the topic (i.e., volume 82, no. 3, September 1990). Things look very good indeed for the gifted.

Yet at the same time that such progress is being made, it is estimated that 50% of gifted students currently underachieve (Reis, 1989; as cited in

where but here!

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Landers, 1989). Moreover, many schools are or are considering closing down existing gifted programs. Even if services are not eliminated for the gifted, homogeneous grouping of gifted students, which has been shown to enhance their academic growth (e.g., Kulik & Kulik, 1982; Rogers, 1990), is under increasing attack, and even being abandoned. To make matters worse, cooperative learning programs, the latest panacea to hit the schools, have questionable value for gifted students and may even be a negative influence on their development (see Robinson, 1990 and Slavin, 1990). Acceleration, which is a program option for the gifted that is best supported by research findings conducted over a span of 60 years, still is infrequently used and often met with skepticism. Finally, appropriate ways of serving rural and minority students seems to allude us.

In Iowa, my home state, the situation is analogous. At all three regent institutions we have faculty and programs devoted to the gifted. We have record-breaking attendance at state conventions focusing on the gifted. A Governor's Summer Institute for Talented and Gifted was recently established. There are several summer programs for gifted being offered across the state, many just newly developed. We have a National Center for Gifted Education at the University of Iowa. The participation in our Iowa Talent Search, just launched last year, is also record breaking, boasting the highest participation rate in the nation. Programs for gifted are legislatively mandated. Yet at the same time that such progress is being made, I receive frequent panic calls from parents and teachers in Iowa because their local gifted program might be eliminated. It is these telephone calls that prompted me to write this article.

How can we save a gifted program that has been put on the chopping block? What could have been done to prevent this ordeal from happening in the first place? What do we do if, heaven forbid, our gifted program is eliminated? What role can acceleration (i.e., using curricula designed for older students with young gifted students) play in all of this?

In this article, I will present some of my thoughts on these issues and will attempt to answer these crucial questions. The practical suggestions that I provide draw primarily on

accelerative principles because it is a program option so frequently ignored. In addition, I will provide a synopsis of research findings showing that educational provisions for the gifted do have long-term positive effects. Again, a special emphasis is placed on acceleration. The evidence to be presented could be extremely useful when trying to save a program about to be cut. Finally, I will discuss acceleration, why it should be part of any program for gifted students, and how it can, by itself, meet the educational needs of many, but of course not all, gifted youngsters who have no other options available to them.

A disclaimer is probably in order at this point. This paper is heavily biased towards acceleration, primarily because its benefits are so well documented and because this option, which can be used in any school setting in so many different ways, is not well utilized. The reader needs to be aware, however, that the best program options for gifted utilize both acceleration and enrichment, while, at the same time, attending to the social and emotional needs of gifted students (for an overview of gifted programming see Colangelo & Davis, 1991). Moreover, not all gifted students are good candidates for acceleration (see Benbow, in press, for more details).

Gifted Program Elimination: Why It Happens and How to Prevent It

Elitism

Many individuals are deeply committed to the idea that somehow it is undemocratic or elitist to provide special provisions for gifted children. This attitude is perhaps the main pressure that operates against the maintainance of programs for the gifted and often leads to their demise (Starko, 1990). The problem is that equality is viewed as synonomous with providing the same education to everybody. Yet educational equality in actuality involves providing equal opportunity. Equal educational opportunity, in turn, entails equal access to appropriate or quality educational experiences that match, as much as possible, individual learning needs. "Quality of schooling includes not only time-on-task, but time well spent" (Sirotnik, 1983, p. 26). Does this occur for gifted students placed in the general classroom without any special provisions? Is their time well spent? In the vast majority of cases, the answer is a resounding no.

It might be tempting to blame teachers for this problem. Ultimately, it is too much to expect the classroom teacher to handle a classroom of 25 to 30 students, or even more, to adjust their teaching and deliver interventions to those who are having difficulties or have special needs, to challenge the gifted students in their class with activities that are well articulated and part of a scope and sequence, and then in their spare time carry out all of the other duties and tasks assigned. The classroom teacher is in a difficult if not near impossible situation. How do they cope? Teachers adjust their instructional time to the needs of their slower learners (Arlin, 1982; Carrol, 1989), perhaps giving the more able students an enrichment worksheet for challenge. Who, in the same situation, would not adopt the same strategy? Yet an excess of slow-paced instruction and repetition of material already mastered demotivates the intellectually talented students irrespective of whether they are assigned an enrichment sheet or not (Whitmore, 1980). This is unfortunate because, as Carroll (1989) concluded, "available evidence suggests that when the variables of quality instruction and opportunity to learn are properly managed, the variable of student perseverance — willingness to learn — will take care of itself" (p. 30). Because such proper management is not the reality for the gifted in the regular classroom, willingness and ability to learn gradually fades away as a result.

Thus, to handle the elitism argument leveled against gifted programs, I counter with the following: Is it democratic to withhold appropriate educational opportunities from a student who is advanced when it is well documented that this hinders his/her growth? The situation is analogous to asking: Should we withhold appropriate basketball instruction from a student because he/she is already much better at basketball than anyone else in the school? To give this message a different twist, envision the following situation. What if it was decided to slow down the curriculum so that all students would study 2 years below what is now considered to be their grade placement? That is, current fourth graders would study the second grade curriculum. You might think this to be ridiculous, but that is exactly the situation that a gifted child finds him- or herself in. Gifted children are typically 2 years ahead of their agemates, if not more, in their talent area. Yet this situation, which is hardly fair, could be easily alleviated if gifted students were accelerated in grade level or in their area(s) of talent.

Anti-Intellectualism

Americans and many others are hostile to intellectual pursuits and those who are seen as intellectually gifted (Hofstadter, 1963). Our society seems to not only allow but applaud certain areas of talent, such as in sports, music, or the arts. Yet intellectual talent spurs considerable ambivalence, perhaps even threatening the self-esteem of others. There is perhaps no real way to address this problem but to point out the inconsistency in people's reasoning. Why do we develop some talents but not others?

This anti-intellectual attitude makes it difficult for a gifted student to be accepted by his/her peer group. Teenagers, for example, tend to accept giftedness in an individual only if the gifted student exhibits no effort at achieving high grades and if he/she shares a love for sports. A hard-working gifted student who has little if no interest in sports probably has no chance of being accepted by his/her peers (Tannenbaum, 1962). Do such attitudes affect a gifted student's achievement? Indeed, they do. Coleman (1960) found that high ability students were less likely to underachieve in school settings in which students had positive feelings about scholastic pursuits. Gifted programs can provide this supportive atmosphere for their participants.

Program Planning

Often resentment towards gifted programs emanate from the nature of the activities offered to participants; to the outside observer they seem to be beneficial to all students, not just the gifted. When programs are designed to address gifted students' unique educational needs, it is much more difficult to criticize them. For example, providing

advanced mathematics to a student who is functioning several grades above grade placement is difficult to label as elitist. Thus, all programs should be tailored to meet the unique learning needs of individual gifted children. (In reality, this is just sound educational practice.) Educational acceleration is one appropriate way of meeting the specific learning needs of gifted students. Our research has shown that gifted students are precocious (i.e., advanced in their development) and, thus, need access to advanced curricula. Advanced curriculum is the appropriate match for an advanced student, but not appropriate for other, less advanced students.

Identification

Gifted programs are often criticized because of their limited and variable identification criteria (Starko, 1990). Despite the strong calls for multiple identificaiton criteria, more identification systems still depend largely on IQ (Feldhusen, 1989; Richert, Alvino, & McDonnel, 1982; Yarborough & Johnson, 1983) and even on demonstrated achievement (Gallagher & Courtright, 1986). As a result, there is limited opportunity for participation in gifted programs among individuals with just one talent area, with creative ability, who are underachieving or learning disabled, or who are culturally different. This situation is difficult to justify. Identification systems, therefore, should be inclusive rather than exclusive in their focus. Renzulli and Reis' (1986) idea of a "talent pool" could be useful in this regard. The talent pool contains all students who have some talent; multiple procedures are used to identify them. Now, all talent pool students are not served at all times. Rather students are rotated in and out of programs, being able to take advantage of opportunities that meet their needs. To amend this idea somewhat, I would suggest that all students in need of acceleration be advanced and then rotated in and out of appropriate gifted programs. That way their learning needs are met every school day rather than just the typically few hours spent in the gifted class each week.

Negative Consequences of Gifted Programs

Another frequent concern raised in regard to gifted programs is that they might make the participants become conceited or self-centered and develop a lack of understanding for the average person. "Gifted children, after all, must learn to live in the real world at some time." Sjostrand (1967) has shown, however, that the opposite occurs. Greater appreciation for equality and individual differences is fostered in gifted students attending special classes. Moreover, students are usually less likely to brag or show off in a group of their intellectual peers. Homogeneous grouping or acceleration are both methods that place gifted children with their intellectual peers.

It is also argued that removing gifted children from their regular classroom deprives the other children of good role models. Yet the literature on the effects of modeling has convincingly shown that people are more likely to imitate another person's behavior when that person is perceived to be similar to themselves. Models displaying flawless performance have less of an influence on achievement than do models making mistakes (Schunk, Hanson, & Cox, 1987). Removing gifted children from the classroom might even foster greater achievement of the other students because it could in the process increase those students' self-efficacy. At the very least, however, removal of gifted children from the regular classroom provides opportunities for other students to become leaders. Also, accelerated students become good models for the older students.

Ownership

Another frequent problem with gifted programs is that they lack school/community ownership. Unfortunately, school personnel and the community do not view it as their program of which to be proud. As noted above, they often do not understand why gifted programs are needed if they can be justified on democratic grounds. Compounding difficulties, it is also widely assumed that such children will make it on their own regardless of special attention. (Below I show that this is not the case.)

At the same time, gifted children are frequently viewed as a national resource. For example, Horowitz and O'Brien (1986) acknowledged that if the educational experiences of intellectually talented children do not maximize their potential, the U.S. loses an important national resource. Nevertheless, gifted programs are often seen as frill programs.

Communication with parents, staff, and others, involving all staff in program planning and development, and, if possible, structuring the program so that some aspects or spinoffs of the gifted program benefit all students in the school, as Renzulli and Reis (1986) recommend and outline procedures for doing, are ways to address this problem.

Program Benefits

Finally, a criticism that is often voiced when programs for the gifted are up for elimination is the lack of evidence for their ability to enhance the development of gifted students. Unfortunately, few programs have formal evaluative procedures. If they do, the evaluation is usually in the form of whether the students and/or parents were satisfied, not in terms of student growth. Results from the longitudinal Study of Mathematically Precocious Youth (SMPY), now located at Iowa State University, can help, however, in this regard.

SMPY is conducting a 50 year longitudinal study, documenting the process and the factors which have an impact upon the process whereby childhood potential develops and grows into adult achievement. We are attempting to answer the following questions: What factors seem to be related to the proper utilization of talent? Why do some gifted students achieve and some, despite their talents, become underachievers? In search of answers to such questions, a graduate student of mine, Julie Phye, and I compared highly gifted 23-year-old individuals who were considered to be underachievers with a like-aged group of highly gifted students, matched for ability, who were achieving. Both of these groups of students had been identified as highly gifted at age 13, and we have much information on their development and educational experiences up until age 23. Before age 13, the two groups could not be differentiated. The achievers did, however, come more frequently from homes where the parents had completed college. Educational experiences in high school comprised a major factor separating the two groups. The

achievers had experienced much more challenging educational programs.

Because gifted students whose parents had not completed college appeared to be at greater risk for underachievement, we then compared two groups of students who came from families where the parents had not completed college. One group of students, just like their parents, had not and were not in the process of completing college by age 23, while the other group had done so and were attending graduate school. The most important factor on which the two groups differed was in their educational experiences in high school. Seemingly most influential in sparking high achievement were those programs designed specifically for advanced students.

The above investigation indicated that, without proper challenge and educational programming, gifted students are prone to underachieve. Results from SMPY's longitudinal study also reveal the converse, that providing appropriate educational programming to gifted students can enhance their achievement. Again using SMPY's longitudinal data base, Benbow and Arjmand (1990) compared, at age 23, highly achieving gifted students with equally gifted students whose achievement must be labeled as low. It was found that the most important factors that could separate these two groups were educational experiences in high school and family background characteristics. Benbow, Arjmand, and Walberg (in press) refined these findings further. It was quality not quantity of educational experiences in high school that could predict subsequent educational achievement. (Please note that in all of these investigations we could not test the effects of elementary school experiences as we had no data for those years.)

SMPY is not purely a research program. Rather, it conducts research through service to gifted students. Much of this programmatic work has involved using accelerative options in designing educational programs that match the learning needs of its gifted students. Initial results of this work was highly promising (Benbow & Stanley, 1983). Swiatek and Benbow (1990), in a long-term evaluation, compared highly gifted students who had been able to accelerate their education with equally able students who had not. Although few significant differences between the groups were detected, the accelerants displayed higher achievement on essentially all the variables studied, despite being on the average one year younger when all the comparisons were made. Moreover, the accelerants gained in the process at least one year in their educational development. In a related study, Swiatek and Benbow (1991) found that students who participated in a fast-paced mathematics class compared to several comparison groups were more likely to remain in math/science career tracts. Their subsequent achievement in high school and college also tended to be higher. Brody and Benbow (1987), in a 5-year longitudinal study of a cohort of SMPY students, revealed that acceleration benefits students academically while not detracting from social and emotional development. Thus, acceleration seems to enhance the potential of gifted students.

It would be remiss in this context not to mention the excellent work of the Kuliks and Rogers. Through sophisticated research procedures, Kulik and Kulik (1982, 1984) and Rogers (1990) have shown that both acceleration and homogeneous grouping benefit gifted students. In terms of acceleration, the academic benefits were seen as large in magnitude. Although the impact of homogeneous grouping was less

notable, of all the groups studied, homogeneous grouping displayed the clearest benefits for gifted students. Kulik (1985), moreover, revealed that enrollment in enriched honors programs also enhances achievement.

All of the above studies, when taken in composite, provide support for the necessity of educational interventions and for the usefulness of acceleration for gifted students. As Tannenbaum (1991) noted, to bring giftedness fully to life, cognitive faculties have to be energized through an enriched environment. Many gifted students achieve below the level of their potential if not provided with an appropriate education, which is a loss to society — a compelling argument, if one must be made, for maintaining educational interventions for gifted students.

What If Your Program Dies or You Do Not Have One?

Acceleration is one of the most time-honored program adaptations for gifted students; its use dates back to the one-room schoolhouse. Moreover, most individuals hold the view that acceleration does not promote elitism. Accelerated students do not receive services or participate in opportunities that can be argued to be beneficial to all students. It also costs little for a school system to adopt. As reviewed by me in another forum (Benbow, in press), "acceleration can be justified on both theoretical and empirical grounds. 'Of all the interventions schools provide for the gifted, acceleration is best supported by research' (Van Tassel-Baska, 1989, p. 15). Moreover, students who have been accelerated and their parents view acceleration as positive. Acceleration is something that 'works' (U.S. Department of Education, 1986)" (p. 22). Thus, when no other options are available, and even when there are, I suggest exploring acceleration as a means of meeting the needs of gifted students.

What is acceleration? Basically, it involves using the curriculum or resources designed for older students with young but academically advanced students. It is placement according to competence, a principle readily embraced in the arts and sports. Some of the educational provisions that would fall under the acceleration label are early admision to school, grade skipping, entering college early with or without a high school diploma, taking a course one or two years earlier than typical, going up to a higher grade for instruction in area of talent, taking a college course on a part-time basis before graduating from high school, taking special fast-paced courses during summer or academic year, completing two years of a subject in one year, compressing curricula, taking Advanced Placement (AP) courses and examinations, and individual tutoring in advanced subject matter (Benbow, in press). Any combination of the above alternatives is possible. Moreover, acceleration can be and is best used in conjunction with other program alternatives (e.g., cooperative learning, enrichment) to meet the learning needs of highly gifted students. As a matter of fact, if cooperative learning programs

are to be used in a school, it is very important that gifted students be accelerated first so that they too have the opportunity to learn (Slavin, 1990; Robinson, 1990).

Although misgivings abound and skepticism from teachers and administrators is frequently heard (Southern, Jones, & Fiscus, 1989) and some find it difficult to view acceleration as a program, acceleration is widely endorsed (see Benbow, in press). Even Elkind (1988) views acceleration as appropriate. Moreover, not a single study has shown acceleration to cause long-term damage to gifted students. In contrast, students who are not given the opportunity to accelerate exhibit lower achievement and behavior problems, feel less comfortable in school, and have poor attitudes (Benbow, in press). Thus, *not* accelerating a student can be detrimental.

Thus, it is now widely accepted that any well-conceived program for gifted students should include accelerative options (Feldhusen, 1989). If a school district does not have a program or they decide to eliminate it, acceleration is probably the only viable alternative. Acceleration does meet, in quite an optimal manner, the learning needs of gifted students. It also has the advantage of requiring only minimal monetary and time expenditures.

In closing, many reasons are given for eliminating gifted programs. They can, however, be effectively countered and prevented through proper program planning and communication. It was the intent of this paper to delineate some of the typical concerns voiced against gifted programs and provide a response to them, as well as possible preventative strategies. I noted how acceleration, an often neglected resource, is a program option difficult to criticize, and its inclusion in a gifted program may enhance program longevity. Let me emphasize that any gifted program should include an acceleration component, and, if you have no program at all, acceleration is probably your best option for meeting the learning needs of gifted students. Acceleration, however, works best in combination with other enriching program options. Moreover, acceleration is not appropriate for all gifted students. Guidelines for selecting students who would be good candidates for acceleration can be found in Benbow (in press). Nonetheless, a well-designed program for the gifted should offer many opportunities, with acceleration being just one of them. Most importantly, however, there should be no question as to whether special educational programs for gifted students, whether in the form of acceleration, enrichment, or preferably both, makes a difference. It does.

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