

Chapter 48

An Integral Analysis of Labeling, Inclusion, and the Impact of the K–12 School Experience on Gifted Boys

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ABSTRACT

Gifted learners are frequently marginalized in community classrooms, as they are placed in competition for special education support, with the students who struggle to meet the minimal curricular demands. In this chapter, we describe the practices of identifying and labelling gifted boys, from the perspective of gifted boys attending high school and from the perspectives of a school system. The case discussed is a large urban public school system, which endeavours to effectively identify gifted students and provide them with learner-centred learning environments. We use Wilber's (2000, 2006) Integral model as a conceptual framework to analyze the findings from an empirical study of gifted boys' school experiences (Alisat, 2013). These findings are also supported by our critical praxis, observing and conversing with gifted young people. The Integral Model is a useful framework for understanding the multiple factors impacting gifted students' daily experiences, engagement and achievement.

INTRODUCTION

Imagine you are a child attending school, being in class everyday and already knowing and understanding what is being taught to you. The gifted students, who are the subjects of this chapter, discussed this daily drudgery of boredom, repetition and lack of appropriate challenge. They described being told to “wait for the class to catch up” or to “go around the class and see who could use your help,” or they were

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given extra work (worksheets or more questions), or an extra project, because they finished early. Some gifted students would withdraw, while others would create a distraction to change up the monotony. These student experiences reflect some of the widely held societal attitudes toward gifted students: gifted students are advantaged, gifted students have a moral obligation to society to work hard and apply their gift toward the common good, gifted students are the undeserving beneficiaries of genetic recombination, and gifted students are gifted at everything. Parents sometimes exhibit these attitudes, pushing their children to excel at school as well as at numerous extracurricular studies. Schools that consciously or unconsciously act on these attitudes suppress opportunities for the optimal unfolding of these students' potential, which may ultimately inhibit their future success.

Teachers' attitudes toward the needs of gifted learners have a significant impact on the self-esteem and achievement of gifted learners. The gifted learners in this study described teaching practices that supported their performance in classrooms, whether through community engagement, or through alternative or specialized programming. They also shared experiences of teaching practices that did not support their growth and development intellectually, socially or emotionally. In fact, those negative teaching approaches may have contributed to placing some of them at risk for mental illness. Teachers who believe gifted learners 'have it all,' and therefore do not need teacher support and guidance, do not understand gifted learners. It is a matter of social justice, when the needs of other learners in the classroom are continuously placed before the needs of gifted learners. Gifted learners, formally identified or not, have the right to an education that is appropriately challenging to support their growth and development, just as all other learners in classrooms do.

The education of gifted students is also affected by a larger context, beyond the classroom and the school. In school districts, students who are not meeting minimum curricular demands are generally given priority for special support over gifted learners, as evidenced by teachers' and administrators' comments and actions regarding the lack of assessment and programming for gifted learners. However, the provincial and district mandates and policies for personalization of learning are intended to include gifted learners. Provincial funding for Special Education identifies gifted learners as those in need of special provisions. Each district decides what resources each special education area will have and how the resources will be deployed. To this end, the district in this study has developed a variety of programming options. These include cluster-grouping gifted learners within community classes, periodic pull-out classes and full-time congregated settings. The district also employs a system specialist to support gifted learners in all settings.

BACKGROUND

Selected Review of the Literature

The literature identifies contradictions in the conceptions of giftedness, from labeling giftedness and determining effective provisions for gifted learners (Brulles, Saunders, & Cohn, 2010; Brulles & Winebrenner, 2011; Freeman, 2006; Gentry, 1999; Gentry & MacDougall, 2007; Perrone, Wright, Ksiazak, Crane, & Vannatter, 2010; Renzulli & Reis, 2002), to assessing the gifted individual's function in society (Persson, 2009). The relationship that gifted individuals have with those in their world is complex. Contextual characteristics, cultural beliefs, values, organization, etc., play a significant role in their experiences and satisfaction. The interactions and influences of these different factors need to be

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