

A Voice of Reason in the Wilderness

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In this response to Dr. Robinson's essay, the arguments set forth are supported and elaborated upon from this author's personal experiences. Robinson has helped educators reconsider political correctness in order to reshape their vision of what the focus of the field should be. The argument is made that gifted educators must begin once again to lead with their heads instead of their hearts and emotions if the best services are to be provided to the heart of this field: the children themselves. Case studies that illustrate Robinson's statements, both in acknowledgement of the issues on which she has expounded and in trying to arrive at some solution for these issues, are provided.

Introduction

In one of my last conversations with my advisor, Professor Maynard Reynolds, at the University of Minnesota, I was amused when he described his plans for retirement. He declared, smile on face,

I am now going to be able to say all the things I have wanted to say for the past few years and no great arrows will be shot at me. A professor emeritus can be a cranky curmudgeon if he wants to be, and some people may actually listen!

Professor Reynolds' words rushed back to me shortly into my first reading of Professor Robinson's paper, "Two Wrongs Do Not Make a Right: Sacrificing the Needs of Academically Gifted Students Does Not Solve Society's Unsolved Problems." But, quickly, another thought replaced that memory: Robinson was not being a cranky curmudgeon, but, rather, was stating the obvious. She was being that lone voice of reason in the wilderness of political correctness.

But, unlike some who, in recent years, have put forth similar arguments more to alienate or to eliminate affirmative action initiatives, such as Gottfredson (1997); Herrnstein and Murray (1994); and Plomin, DeFries, McClearn, and Rutter (1997), Robinson used the research in gifted education—our research—to support her premises, rather than to rely on the field of behavioral genetics for

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her evidence. I can almost visualize Robinson, sitting in a session 4 years ago at the Wallace Symposium for Talent Development, listening to Linda Gottfredson's bold assertions that some ethnic groups actually do score significantly lower on intelligence tests due to differences in genetic background. As she was listening, she might have been eyeing some of our gifted minority advocates in that audience or listening to the growing angry mutterings of White gifted educators around her as they listened to Linda's arguments and wondered why they needed to be made in so negative a way. I can almost imagine Robinson beginning to turn her thinking at that time to how the arguments she sets forth in this treatise should be stated so that people in our field would listen and heed.

The strength of Robinson's arguments lies in her focus on the needs of intellectually and academically gifted children for a program of services that will keep them challenged on a daily basis. She did not tell us to ignore the idea of ethnic differences or gender differences or economic class differences. Instead, she suggested that we get back to educating for the purpose of developing potential and talent, regardless of the differences or lack of differences we see in front of us. In her arguments about the prime importance of economic class as a variable affecting the development of gifts and talents, she told us that racial differences (and, in my mind, gender differences, too) play a much smaller role in hindering such development. Her research citations and arguments were well marshaled and correct. I suspect, however, the issue is even more complicated than just the either-or of class and race. To me, the interactions of class, race, and gender go far to explain our lack of ability to recognize and program adequately for talent development. We have tried to oversimplify our explanations of our failures and, thus, have lost sight of what we should be about. Robinson helps to bring us, at least partially, back on course.

As a case in point: Eight years ago, one urban school district (second largest in our state) started to struggle with developing a centralized identification system that would ensure proportionate participation by the 63 ethnic groups represented in the district. Before that time, each school had used its own "system" for recognizing talent, with self-selection being the primary procedure used in most of the district's schools. Evaluations showed, unfortunately, that many ethnic groups were reluctant to self-select, and, thus, programs tended to be primarily White and Asian in composition. The district also "contended" with providing one school for the academically gifted, an institution unilaterally "hated" by teachers in most of the other district schools, but seen by parents as "the" school in

which to enroll their children with gifts and talents. This school used standardized tests of achievement and intelligence for entrance, while still using an affirmative action approach to the final selection of students who would attend. Year after year, the waiting list of White students grew (at one point there were 150 students on it with IQs over 140), while students with much lower scores but of different ethnic groups were accepted almost upon application. Approximately 1 out of every 7 White students, selected by lottery, were allowed to attend this school, despite academic needs for such an education validated by high scores.

The district, therefore, had to find some means of identifying children appropriate for this magnet school that would ensure culture fairness to all 63 of its ethnic groups. It lit upon the assessment task/observation procedure developed by Maker in the mid-1990s, known as Discover. *All* kindergarteners in the district were assessed on these open-ended, spatial, and storytelling tasks, tasks believed to be independent of one's background or abilities to read or compute early. Those students who scored most highly on this assessment were invited to come to the magnet school. What the statistics showed, however, was that (a) although ethnic representation went up, it still was not proportionate; (b) the biggest demographic difference in the school was the increased number of economically disadvantaged children; (c) many high-IQ Whites and high-verbally-able children of other ethnic groups did not qualify under the new system; and (d) the children who came to this school were ill-prepared for school in general, let alone for an academically gifted magnet school. A good proportion of those identified were achieving at the 12th to 15th percentile on standardized tests of achievement—a difficult issue in a school for academically achieving learners. To the credit of the school, however, the veteran teachers there did their best to learn necessary remediation techniques, namely, to increase the number of repetitions these children needed to master concepts and to slow down their regular pace of presentation and learning.

What this case illustrates, I believe, is that the well-intended goal of proportionate representation forced this school to change what it offered to children with academic gifts and talents. In this case, the instrument used did not collect data on the kinds of students who would be successful in such a school. Hence, no one's actual educational needs were well served, neither the academically gifted or talented child's nor those of the ethnically different child.

Well into her essay, Robinson argued for providing preparatory programs to bring potentially talented ethnically and economically

disadvantaged children “up to speed.” For me, this offers a true solution to this very complex and emotionally laden problem. Now in its third year of implementation, Catalyst 345, a Javits-Grant-funded program for another large urban school district in this state, has shown remarkable progress in providing such preparation. This 3-year program began by using second-grade teachers’ observations of ethnically different and economically disadvantaged children in four schools. For two of these schools, the students identified by these teachers as having potential began a half-day daily program in reading and mathematics in third grade. They not only spent an intense but fast-paced time on the “basics” of these subjects, but also participated in the College of William & Mary enrichment units. It was a wonder to watch these children last spring, as they were finishing their fourth-grade year, perform a readers’ theater of *The Secret Garden*. It was clear that they were actively engaged in this very complicated story, its layers of meaning, and its complicated dialect. In short, the children loved it! I watched the principal’s jaw drop in one school as her bevy of Somali, Hmong, and African American Catalyst 345 students read their roles with meaning and expression. What’s more, both the first- and second-year pre- and postassessments of critical thinking and district reading and mathematics achievement test scores showed significant gains when compared to the two control schools, each with equally high-potential, ethnically different, and economically disadvantaged children (Rogers, 2001, 2002a). The program will be considered successful ultimately if (and when) these catalyst children choose to take advanced classes in middle school and high school. Plans are underway to monitor their course taking in the years to come.

It is clear we have learned enough in our field to know how to prepare those who are not ready for the rigorous academically challenging curriculum we have spent decades learning how to develop. At this point, we must just give ourselves permission to acknowledge that some children, fully deserving of such services, may not be ready for them and, if admitted anyway, will disturb the actual quality of such experiences for those who are ready. In my recent book, *Re-Forming Gifted Education: Matching the Program to the Child* (Rogers, 2002b), I have argued that our efforts in educating the gifted child, no matter what his or her gift or talent, need to be apportioned based upon what we know of each child’s cognitive functioning level, personal characteristics, learning preferences, and interests inside and outside of school. In general, we should spend approximately 65% of our efforts on developing or enhancing that child’s talents or gifts. Ten percent of our effort should focus on remedia-

Table 1
List of Possible Options for Gifted Learners

Instructional management	Instructional differentiation	Curricular differentiation
Advanced Placement/International Baccalaureate	Accelerated pacing	Abstract content
Cluster grouping	Accelerative replacement activities in compacting	Aesthetics, criticism
College-in-the-schools	Complexity/detail	Arts training
Compacting	Conceptual discussions	Computer programming
Concurrent enrollment	Consistent challenge	Creative-skills training
Correspondence courses	Creative problem solving	Critical-skills training
Credit for prior learning	Daily challenge	Dilemmas/conflict resolution
Cross-graded grouping	Depth of content	Early-content mastery
Early college admission	Elimination of drill/review	Intensive foreign language training
Early entrance to school	Enrichment replacement activities in compacting	Interdisciplinary connections/themes
Full-time GT program	Flexible project deadlines and requirements	Keyboarding skill
Grade skipping	Higher order thinking	Literary classics
Grade telescoping	Individualized benchmark setting	Memory development
GT school	Intuitive expression	Methods of inquiry
Independent study	Like-ability group projects	Organization/time-management skills training
Individual Education Plan (IEP)	Open-ended problems	Philosophy/humanities
Like-ability cooperative learning	Proof and reasoning	Planning techniques
Mentorships	Real audiences	Problem-based learning
Multigrade classrooms	Self-instructional materials	Problem-solving skill training
Nongraded classrooms	Simulations	Self-concept building
On-line individualization	Systematic feedback	Self-direction training
Regrouping by ability for specific subject	Talent exhibition	Service learning
Regrouping by performance for subject	Teaching games	Social-issues discussion
Send-out program	Telescoping of learning time	Study of people
Subject acceleration	Time for reflection	Units that expose to new ideas, concepts
Talent search/SMPY	Transformational product	Units that provide full concept development
Testing out	Tutoring	Units that replace/extend regular units
Within-class performance grouping	Whole-to-part learning	Units that supplant regular units

tion of the child's gaps in skills and knowledge, while 10% should be spent on supporting psychological adjustment and 15% on supporting socialization. I have argued that the percentages for socialization and psychological support may vary according to individual students' particular needs (good social skills, but low self-confidence or, conversely, good self-esteem, but no social cognition). What I have not accounted for in this formula are the divergent needs of those with variables that interactively affect their personal development, namely race, class, and gender. Perhaps the formula must be adjusted for a few years until these high-potential students are ready for rigorous academics. Most certainly we would not want 65% of their time to be spent in remediation, but, perhaps, more of a 50% talent development and 50% remediation breakdown, as has occurred with Catalyst 345, until these children are ready for the 65% talent development and 10% remediation approach.

In the meantime, I believe Robinson's treatise gives us hope as a field that we can get down to the serious business of educating all of our gifted children in the *ways* each of them will need. It is my hope that we can reapportion the amount of journal space we now give to panning IQ tests and bad-mouthing tests in general for identification purposes to proposing best practices for specific children at differential stages of potential development. It is time for solutions and the testing of those solutions, rather than continuing to throw out the baby with the bathwater when it comes to issues about testing. We should no longer even be thinking about "a program" in gifted education for which testing is required to "get in." Rather, we should be thinking about how to collect a variety of information on individual children in order to best match their demonstrated needs with any of a variety of options our particular setting can offer (see Table 1). Robinson does a fine job of sending us this message!

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