

Reconsidering General vis-à-vis Gifted Education: A Tentative Model of Equity and Excellence

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Abstract

For many years in the United States and some modernized and industrialized countries, the concepts of equity and excellence have been either at odds or overlapped, especially with respect to gifted and general education. The main purposes of this paper are: First, to examine the concept of equity-versus-excellence in education from a novel perspective; and second, to reconsider the conventional concept of general vis-à-vis gifted education. This paper argues that providing for the needs of gifted students by giving them the opportunity to pursue excellence is itself consistent with promoting educational equity. The paper then suggests a tentative new model of equity and excellence within the current education system by providing ideas and insights from a fresh point of view. It concludes with recommendations for schools and teachers to optimize the opportunity for students from diverse backgrounds, including the gifted, to achieve excellence without forgoing equity.

Keywords: *equity, excellence, general education, gifted education, inclusive education*

Introduction

To some educators it seems that by supporting gifted education, we have to sacrifice “equity” in general education. Conversely, others believe that furthering equity in general education ought to preclude extra support to the gifted, as they are already endowed with giftedness. However, in their own ways, both views discount the needs of gifted students for specifically tailored, equitable education, much as disabled students who deserve special education.

At the outset, the concepts of equity and excellence require clarification. On the one hand, “equity” in education sometimes might be viewed as “equal education” (i.e., providing the same or similar services to all students generally). However, after both qualitative and quantitative measures are applied, we can see that providing equal education differs from providing “equitable education,” the latter referring to the provision of different opportunities to different students according to their individual ability levels. Historically, the provision of specialized instruction for gifted students through specifically designed curricula and programs (in order for them to reach their potential) has been subject to the frequent criticism of unjustifiably serving only an “elite” group of the population (Spielhagen, 2012), mainly because doing so can be seen to diminish “educational equity” writ large.

On the other hand, “excellence” entails students’ attainment of their individual potential. This paper explores the idea that, as a concept, educational excellence does not need to be viewed as mutually competitive with equity. Under this alternative definition of gifted education, “equity” would mean that gifted students are provided with advanced resources, suitably differentiated curricula, and various programs that facilitate their quest for “excellence,” each at their own pace and level. The question before us, then, is to determine how schools and teachers can help maintain the balance of equity and excellence within their current educational system, and how students, including the gifted, can attain excellence without sacrificing equity.

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Equity vis-à-vis Excellence

One of the major contentious issues facing education for decades has been how to maintain the proper balance between equity and excellence, namely, how to promote academic excellence and increase equity in education at the same time (Peters & Engerrand, 2016). While arguable, it has often been suggested that the ultimate goal of education should be to enable all learners to attain excellence (Jacobsen & Rothstein, 2006). Understood this way, it is not surprising to see that gifted education is not supported by those who regard it as only enabling a certain population to flourish at the expense of the rest. Even as recently as the 21st century, we still see some educators oppose allocating more capital and human resources to gifted education in the belief that the gifted already have enjoyed far more academic advantages than normal students their entire lives. As Gallagher (2003) remarks, “Those who stress equity as a premium value see evil designs in the attempt to provide special help for gifted students (excellence)” (p. 20). Awaya (2001) also raises the problem of assuming that providing specific support and resources to the gifted is tantamount to giving more money to rich people, like “a reward for those who have already displayed the desired characteristics” (p. 194). In this view, such critics take for granted that gifted students do not merit further support because they are already endowed with more intelligence and abilities without having to earn them (Coil, 2012). Stanley and Baines (2002) pointed to the fact that in the U.S, on an average \$30 billion were spent on special education Programs each year, whereas funding for gifted education was 1% or less this amount.

Undergirding the alternative approach is the belief that each individual is ideally entitled to develop to his or her full potential, a gifted child being no exception (Wu, 2009). As with all students, the gifted have specific curricular, instructional, and learning resource needs; for them to attain their unique levels of learning capacities, they should commensurately be provided suitable learning experiences, much as disabled students with special learning needs. In other words, the same reasoning for the provision of appropriate and challenging resources to diverse children with average academic abilities also applies to the gifted. Concomitantly, the gifted, because they also have their own unique individual and specific needs, should likewise have access to the support required to deal with the exceptional difficulties inherent in being gifted.

Nevertheless, a considerable body of theories and research (e.g., see Borland, 1996; Ford, 2011; Renzulli & Reis, 2002; Tomlinson, 2014; Tomlinson & Callahan, 1992) indicates that providing appropriate and dedicated education is crucial to realize the optimal development of the gifted and lead them to excellence. In this view, the prevailing ethos is that public schools should offer additional services for the gifted in the endeavour to provide them with enhanced learning opportunities. Both the local community as well as the larger society should thus advocate and promote gifted education as such so that they might fulfil their potential, regardless of background (Ford, 2011).

However, as the student population as a whole is becoming more and more diverse racially, ethnically, culturally, and linguistically, academic excellence is displayed unevenly among different groups (Harris & Plucker, 2014). Recent studies reveal disparities of underperformance in academic achievement among African American, Latinos, and Native American student groups compared to White and Asian American groups (APA Report, 2013). The under-representation of Black and Hispanic students in the field of gifted education is specifically significant (Ford, 2010). To this end, the School-Wide Enrichment Model by Renzulli (1998, 2012) advocates that extended programs be disseminated in school systems of the United States’ as well as worldwide. Likewise, Tomlinson’s (2014) instructional differentiation model also provides important guidance for teachers on how to differentiate their teaching in either pull-out gifted programs or regular classrooms.

Research also suggests that some gifted students may also experience social-emotional problems to varying degrees. The inference of this view points to the provision of differentiated curricula and inspirational learning environments to enhance the quality of gifted education. For gifted students have also been shown at times to underachieve, wasting their talent and potential, or acting out against society in harmful ways (Adams-Lackey & Lackey, 2005).

No doubt, specifically designed programs can have positive influence on gifted students’ academic performance and their social-emotional development. The question then arises with respect to the proper learning environment: Is it better to teach the gifted in homogeneous settings or to teach them in heterogeneous environments? In homogeneous settings, gifted students can learn together with their academically compatible peers, while in heterogeneous settings, they would be learning in regular classrooms with students at different learning levels.

This question is the subject of the following section, which focuses on analysing the advantages and disadvantages of homogeneous versus heterogeneous settings. As we would expect, this has also proved a controversial topic over the years, linked closely as it is to the larger discussion of equity versus excellence.

General vis-à-vis Gifted Education

Studies indicate that the prevailing situation for gifted education in regular classrooms is not optimal (e.g., VaTassel-Baska & Stambaugh, 2005; Bernal, 2003). Gifted students are frequently neglected, intentionally or unintentionally, as teachers may assume they are offering differentiated instructions by asking the gifted to help their peers, rather than by directly offering them more appropriate opportunities to excel (Bernal, 2003; Wu, 2013). Without professional development on gifted education, regular classroom teachers may not be able to provide adequate curriculum and instruction to gifted students. They may also lack the confidence to make appropriate modifications of learning content, process and assessment. A study by Reis and colleagues (2004) reveals that even though technology has increasingly advanced and offered various ways for instructional and curricular differentiation, very little has been done within schools and classrooms to resolve the deficiency of service problem to the gifted population.

Anticipating academic issues related to gifted education in the 21st century, Passow (1993) points out that the conflict over choosing between equity and excellence may have highlighted an apparent dilemma between employing either homogeneous or heterogeneous settings for teaching the gifted. On the one hand, supporters advocate that services for gifted students should be offered within the normal school time and environment (heterogeneous setting). On the other, some believe that the gifted would learn and achieve at a much higher level when given more suitable instructions and learning opportunities in homogeneous setting such as pull-out programs.

The latter strategy is based on research that shows gifted and talented students learn better in pull-out programs, where they have more advanced and well-developed curricula with broader and deeper levels of content and faster pace of learning (Feldhusen, 2003; Tomlinson, 2014). It seems that this setting not only provides opportunity for faster academic growth under appropriate intellectual challenges, but also promotes confidence in being recognized by peers and chances for interactions and communications with students who have similar and comparable cognitive as well as affective characteristics. Without rigorous and individualized instruction in a homogeneous classroom, so the reasoning goes, many exceptionally gifted students would hardly have enough opportunities to be challenged, inspired, and eventually to achieve highly. Robinson (2003) notes that with adequately designed curricula and instruction, such self-contained homogeneous classes "... are the easiest, least expensive, and most effective way to meet the needs of the brightest students while, at the same time, enabling them to profit from the stimulation and support of other bright students" (p.262).

There is a variety of options to structure homogeneous settings in addition to pull-out programs, such as extracurricular, or Saturday or summer enrichment programs. These options offer the gifted various opportunities with challenges and stimulation they need for learning (Olszewski-Kubilius & Lee, 2004; Schenkel, 2002). Hertzog (2003), for example, conducted research with a group of gifted students in comparing regular classroom learning and pull-out programs. The results reveal that, from the viewpoint of gifted students themselves, there were two major differences between their gifted and regular classes. The first involved the behaviour of the students, who appeared to enjoy their learning activities and processes in pull-out programs more than in regular class settings. The second concerns the characteristics of the pull-out teachers, who appeared to be more enthusiastic as well as competent. Additionally, students in this study themselves expressed their preference to be enrolled in full-time programs specifically for the gifted, rather than in part-time programs. They indicated that in part-time programs they were more likely to encounter rejection from regular peer groups, as well as uncomfortable learning and socializing environments.

Notwithstanding, homogeneous settings can also have their drawbacks, even though evidence has shown such settings may have more benefits in stimulating giftedness and talent development. Heinbokel (2002) points out those specific settings can lead to productive and effective learning results for gifted students. Nevertheless, the author also notes that concentrating on this small group of students "... would draw a lot of energy, time and money away from the rest of the gifted" (p.178). For this reason, it is understandable that many school teachers and administrators prefer to have gifted students in regular classrooms, while trying to pay more attention to delivering curricula and instruction that may benefit not only the gifted, but also as many as possible other regular students.

Other research (e.g., Barone & Schneider, 2003; Postlethwaite, 2008) indeed demonstrates that both gifted students and other students can benefit from joint enrolment in regular teaching and learning environments that rigorously deploy flexible, open-ended, and differentiated curricula and instruction. One example of the benefit that gifted students may gain from learning in regular classroom settings involves learning knowledge, skills and experience in a heterogeneous environment that more closely resembles real life after schooling (Barone & Schneider, 2003). There is also evidence that heterogeneous settings not only bring positive learning outcomes for students in general, especially those in elementary or middle school levels, they also are preferred by classroom teachers (see Kulik & Kulik, 1992; Robinson, 2003; Slavin, 1993).

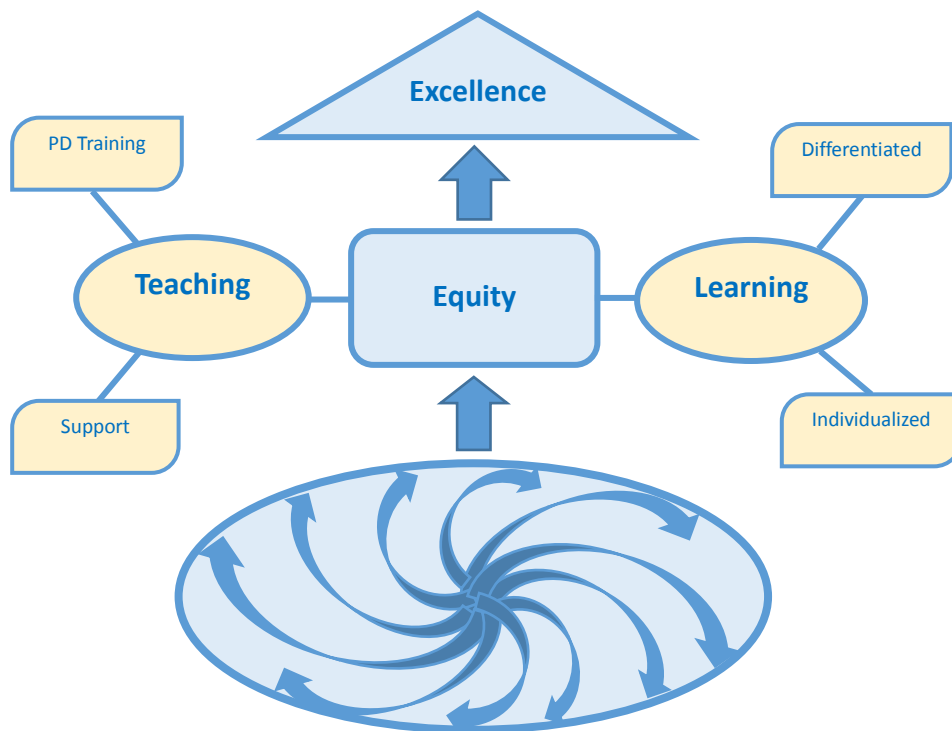
An alternative between exclusively homogeneous or heterogeneous learning settings for gifted students is ability grouping within regular classrooms. In large population cities and schools, classrooms are frequently characterized by a wide range of learning interests and capacities, making it more difficult to provide a homogeneous learning environment. In such situations, ability grouping would challenge gifted students at suitable levels that more closely match their own potential (Kettler & Curliss, 2003; Reed, 2004).

Nevertheless, to those exceptionally gifted and talented children whose academic abilities are significantly higher than either their regular classroom or mildly gifted peers, a single strategy of ability grouping within their same-age classrooms may not offer adequate challenges (Rogers, 2002). In such cases, deliberately enriched and accelerated curricula with suitable adjustment of content, process and products of learning can be much more appropriate for this group of highly advanced learners. Special schools or full-time special classes that deliver this kind of instruction can therefore more effectively facilitate their achievement.

In summary, gifted students, like all students, are different and need individualized learning choices. They can be placed either in homogeneous settings for acceleration with peers having similar-ability levels or in heterogeneous settings in regular classrooms with peers of the same age, or in enrichment ability groups for specific subjects, or within-class ability groupings. As discussed previously, each of the options comes with its own advantages and disadvantages. Therefore, they should all be considered separately on their diverse merits in advance before settling on any one or few for the gifted students in specific school systems (Rogers, 2002).

A Tentative Model of Equity and Excellence

In the tentative model of equity and excellence below (see Figure 1), we try to illustrate not only the importance of the various aspects of equity in education leading to excellence, but also the ever-changing dynamics of education encountered in the modern world. The swirling arrows within the oval of dynamics represent the vibrant nature of student backgrounds that schools and teachers are supposed to understand and respond to accordingly. The various aspects include, but are not limited to, racial and ethnic, gender and age related issues, cultural and linguistic differences, student family backgrounds (e.g., divorce or single, more or less formally educated, social-economic status, etc.), school setting (e.g., urban, suburban or rural, affluent or poor district, etc.), student nature (e.g., gifted, regular or disabled), student personal interest and motivation, student learning style or preference, and many more. Maintaining the equitable education standard in such a dynamic student body, including both gifted and non-gifted, requires a substantial effort from school administrators and teachers to pay attention to most every aspect as much as possible for all students. Educators need to have continuous professional development opportunities to improve and adjust their teaching. They also need strong and consistent support from schools and districts to access instructional resources and professional growth opportunities. Equitable learning requires educators to individualize and differentiate instruction so that students learn at the level suitable to their academic needs and learning abilities. We are of course aware of the reality that even with the most equitable education, not every student will achieve excellence. Accounting for all various and unavoidable circumstances within each individual student, teacher or school is not feasible. Nevertheless, the most important thing is that schools provide the greatest possible equity within the inclusive education framework to all students, giving the majority opportunities to develop and achieve excellence.



Ever-Changing Dynamics

(e.g., racial; ethnic;cultural; gender;age; family background; urban/suburban/rural; gifted/regular/disabled; personal interest/motivation; learning style etc.)

Figure 1: A Tentative Model of Equity & Excellence in Inclusive Education

Inclusive Education: Recommendations for Schools and Teachers

The contrast between homogeneous and heterogeneous settings for the gifted can thus be examined in a manner analogous to the choice that inheres between gifted education and general education. Indeed, the latter is a more expanded version of the former, within which all issues related to homogeneous or heterogeneous settings can be discussed. Researchers like Bernal (2003) and Delisle (2005) hold that gifted education should be totally separated from general education, and gifted children should not be disposed in regular classroom with a large variety of learning abilities. They think that gifted students must be given the chance to learn in specifically designed gifted programs; otherwise, they may lose the opportunity to develop their potential to the fullest. A concern can be that promoting general education may harm gifted education by advocating heterogeneous over homogeneous settings (e.g., Awaya, 2001). The main reason for this concern can be seen in the general education situation, where the gifted may not have as much opportunity to thrive, and teachers may not have the knowledge ability to accommodate differentiation. Furthermore, teachers in this situation may have to pay more attention to students at the middle point of ability spectrum in regular classroom teaching, or even worse, as in many contemporary U.S. schools: devote their attention disproportionately to those at the bottom level of learning and achieving.

Theoretical research and empirical practices on gifted education have offered insights to enhance general understanding of instructional differentiation models and strategies (Brulles & Winebrenner, 2011; Postlethwaite, 2008; Tomlinson, 2014; Wu, 2013). Nevertheless, it may unfortunately be unrealistic to expect that all gifted children be given enough opportunities to grow in academically challenging and social-emotionally and environmentally inspiring situations. Many questions remain for us to devise more realistic alternatives so that we may get the best out of less than ideal situations. The first question to address, then, would be how to identify giftedness and talent among those with potential, even considering that many may be struggling and underachieving. In these cases, underachievement could be caused by various social-emotional problems, such as behaviour or personality issues, or their identities as members of minority groups, or by families in poor financial and educational situations, or their places of origin in rural or remote areas.

In addition, it is not uncommon for many gifted and talented to be left behind, while some of the smart but non-gifted children may be (mistakenly) included within gifted programs. This can become especially complicated when gifted education is very isolated from general education. Given our best effort to correctly identify gifted students, the next question is how we can be certain that once identified, their program options are not just a superficial exercise leading nowhere. How can we make sure those identified as gifted students are offered appropriate curricula and instructions as well as sufficient social-emotional support, so that they can eventually reach their potential? Ideally, they would be provided with what they truly need to learn, regardless of homogeneous heterogeneous settings, whether they reside in urban or rural contexts of the US, or in developing countries.

A third question, then, while offering gifted students programs in either homogeneous or heterogeneous settings, how we should address and resolve those hidden problems or difficulties that may be endemic to either setting, such as those discussed in the previous section. For it is these problems or difficulties that can be so difficult to determine, especially in densely populated, developing countries like China and India. Homogeneous settings for the gifted there may be totally unrealistic, while heterogeneous settings with proper curricula and instruction may be more feasible, but still extremely challenging to teachers with large numbers of students.

When considering which type of education is more suitable to gifted education, we may prudently conclude that inclusive education could be key, especially because it can be more practical, effective, as well as holistic when applied to the gifted. As we have seen, inclusive education models the close relationship between gifted and general education, combining them, as it does, while accommodating their differences by offering specific and advanced programs to those highly gifted and talented students whenever there are opportunities to do so. Through various school implementation formats that are available, such as differentiated curricula or groupings, inclusive education can provide a better chance for the gifted and talented to reach their potential and thus enhance their future.

An inclusive education approach may also help educators across the board answer questions and tackle problems normally encountered in exclusive education settings. For instance, in inclusive settings advanced programs can be more available to a larger student population, and professional training may cover larger groups of teachers. As a cautionary note, implementing gifted programs within an inclusive education context is not an easy task, especially as we are mindful of the implications of an educational philosophy that is based on the idea that every individual has his or her own unique value and potential (Buchanan, Woerner, Bigam & Cascade, 1997). However, overall, the implementation of appropriate gifted programs can better serve the gifted and talented within the general education frame, as well as nurture talent for the benefit of society without unrealistically burdening school administrators and educators.

In short, we suggest here that gifted education and general education can be interwoven to certain extents, as their antecedents are already interrelated. To achieve optimal equity and excellence on behalf of the gifted population, therefore, we need to consider carefully the implications of our conclusion. With further study, it may well be possible to develop clearer insight on how to offer the best education to all students while simultaneously establishing a niche for gifted education within the inclusive education context.

Summary

In the past decades, many important issues related to gifted education have been discussed. The topics include, but are not limited to, equity and excellence in education, educational options for students with diverse backgrounds strengths and weaknesses of homogeneous and heterogeneous settings for the gifted. With a special emphasis on what schools and educators can do within the current reality of P-12 education system, within which the majority of students are taught in an inclusive educational environment.

In the effort to keep faith with the principle of education for all, children everywhere both need and have a right to high quality and equitable education. At the same time and in the same vein the gifted population deserves similar opportunities to meet their unique needs and potential to attain excellence. We can see that suitable services and placements can be delivered in both homogeneous settings, where challenging learning experiences are offered for the gifted to excel, and in heterogeneous settings, where more functional and feasible practices can provide more students the chance to achieve their best. Accordingly, it is suggested here that the optimal combination of gifted education and general education within an inclusive education structure has a more realistic probability to serve the gifted population through providing the most feasible opportunities to achieve under current conditions.

When we try to re-examine the future direction of gifted education, then, we must consider overarching important contingencies that apply to the entire education enterprise, including educational policy at the local, state and federal levels, budget and funding support for individual districts and schools, resources for educators and students, and support from parents and communities. Viewing the situation of the gifted in this fuller context sheds brighter light on the unfeasibility of widespread application of exclusive gifted programs by revealing extant formidable obstacles. That is particularly the case when considering ever-present economic constraints, continuing problems with authentic identification and labelling, emergent needs for their social-emotional development, and many other factors not covered here. The point argued here is that continued adherence to the equity vs excellence fallacy is itself fallacious and counterproductive. As we have seen, the various rationalizations used in support of this conviction hamstring innovation. They inhibit the resolve of administrators and willing teachers to step out from under the yoke of the same inertia that is used to stifle innovation in other aspects of public education. The idea that equity means the same for all, regardless of ability, should be turned on its head and applied to the gifted, whose needs, unique capabilities, and interests can be addressed more feasibly and realistically within the context of current inclusive models of instruction.

Be that as it may, we need to keep in mind Subotnik's point that "Academics tend to analyse problems and do not always get around to solving them" (Henshon, 2005, p.198). So let us take it one step at a time and focus on how to address the most immediate problems and opportunities before us. Not doing so would be irresponsible and the sure way to resign ourselves to avoiding or ignoring the problems we now face: good quality of services for the gifted still not available, clear directions and solutions still intangible, and gifted education overall stagnated, unable to move forward

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