The Future of Gifted Education and The Drowning Man Analogy

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A recent *Wall Street Journal* article (Chapman, 2022) referenced below raised questions about the future of gifted education. The issue mainly referred to is the underrepresentation of low income and minority groups in GT programs and how this concern was causing school districts to drop their programs. It points up that controversy has ramped up around the practice of providing accelerated classes for selected students, raising questions about how programs will look in coming years.

The article brought to mind a legal term that is called, *The Drowning Man Analogy*. Briefly, two people are walking along a river and see a man drowning. The first person says, "I'm not a good swimmer" and refuses to help. The second person dives in and tries to rescue the drowning man, but the man squirms away and drowns. Which person is actionable in a court of law? Obviously, the person who tried to help but couldn't do the job to everyone's satisfaction.

Many school administrators are using the same rationale regarding gifted programs. If we don't have a program, we can't be criticized! "We'll stop identifying students, get rid of our GT teacher, and drop any name that uses the word, gifted." And then they offer some cliches "We'll differentiate for everyone." "All of our teachers are personalizing the curriculum." We all know what this means – more worksheets for struggling students and some extra books and assignments for high-ability kids.

The use of universal screening and local norms, concepts that we support and introduced into our own state identification guidelines many years ago, has helped, but the larger question is *what kinds of instruments and procedures* should we be using to universally screen and compare who does and does not receive supplementary services? And perhaps an even more important question is how do we make decisions about providing the opportunities, resources, and encouragement that develop the strengths and talents of all our young people? Universal screening tools favor traditional standardized achievement tests and the kind of screening that focuses on any kind of norms seldom consider exogenous factors[1] that influence testing and school performance. Predictably, this has resulted in more affluent students receiving a gifted designation. And when all is said and done, local norms still use the cut-off-scores approach that has dominated our identification process.

In most states and countries, almost all students at the third-grade level and above are universally screened by taking state or education ministry required standardized

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[1] An exogenous factor is any trait or behavior that is present and active in an individual but that originated outside that person (e.g., prenatal care and nutrition, early childhood experiences, quality of educational services, environmental opportunities, resources, support).

achievement tests. Current research is (Anderson, 2002; Little et al., 2018; Kearney et al., 2019) currently being conducted on performance-based assessment that shows promise in using this type of assessment procedure for universal screening of primary grades children. Most states and other countries also use some kind of teacher rating scales that are usually analyzed utilizing locally developed norms or norms provided by the distributors of the scales. When we use any kind of norms (national, state, local) we are continuing to use criteria that make comparisons between and among students rather than the individual strengths and interests of any individual student. Although metric-based scores and national, state, and even local norms inform us about the distribution of traditionally measured academic abilities of groups, they do not zero in on individuals' co-cognitive strengths that are so important for decision-making about the need and opportunity to provide supplementary services. These strengths don't make a person gifted or not gifted in the norm-based or entity interpretation of the word, but they are a starting point for decision-making about who should be considered for advanced learning and creative/productive opportunities in particular academic domains and topical strength areas. When all is said and done, local norms tell us *how we interpret* the metric-based information we collect; however, the more important issue is *what kind of information* we choose to gather.

Many people in the field have tried to deal with the underrepresentation question that had dominated our field in the past few years but very few practical suggestions for addressing the issue have been offered. In a previous article (Renzulli, 2021) a system for using Assessment **For** Learning (as opposed to Assessment *Of* Learning) is offered as a practical approach for addressing this challenge. Simply stated, assessment for learning looks at strength-based data gathered from the students themselves and focuses on the personal strengths of students as individuals rather than creating norms for student comparisons. These data typically include interests, instructional style preferences, preferred modes of expression, and other co-cognitive factors such as student engagement and executive function skills. This type of information provides insights into how teachers can modify teaching and learning activities for individuals.

Assessment *for* learning is a formative assessment approach. Formative assessment is ongoing, flexible, and usually informal. It includes information that is gathered for the purposes of modifying instruction during an individual lesson or for future instructional planning. It is based on information gathered from the students during or prior to instruction (i.e., pre-assessment); and is used to adapt teaching to meet student needs. Both formative and summative assessments are important but, "Formative assessment with appropriate feedback is the most powerful moderator in the enhancement of achievement" (Hattie et al., 2007).

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