

Revolving Door: A Truer Turn for the Gifted

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Gifted Education—You Cannot Open Minds With Locked Doors

The notion of exclusion must not shape our attempts to help children develop their gifts. Here are three views that point toward a better way.

Most gifted and talented programming in the schools is only tenuously related to what “giftedness” is and how gifted and talented people work.

When the customary all-or-nothing identification and enrichment procedures are used, few students win admission to a special program for an entire year. Frequently preselected by their high standardized test scores, students spend a part of every day or week from September through June in a special resource room. Once there, they often receive full-class lessons designed to enhance their alleged common denominator of “giftedness” rather than their individual talents and interests. Such programs are commonly regarded as elite and detached from regular classroom activities.

Neither the selection procedures nor very much of what happens in these programs is justified by research. Proficient lesson learners and test takers are favored at the expense of many students who more than compensate for their somewhat lower test scores by having high levels of task commitment and creativity. Research shows that these latter students, rather than those excelling *exclusively* in traditional academic outlets, make the greatest contributions to their respective fields of endeavor.

Schools can and should implement programs that use more reasonable definitions of what “giftedness” is and how talented and gifted people work. The “revolving door” concept, for example, is based on broad, comprehensive identification criteria and can save substantial numbers of gifted students from being arbitrarily cut off from educational opportunities by spurious “you-have-it-or-you-don’t” standards. It can provide supplementary services *when* and in the performance areas *where* such services have the high, demonstrated potential for benefiting particular youngsters. The revolving door model also involves classroom teachers in educating the gifted.

What Is Giftedness

The revolving door model for identifying and teaching gifted youngsters is based on an operational definition of giftedness. This definition, which was developed through an extensive review of research studies dealing with the characteristics of gifted and talented individuals, is predicated on the fact that people recognized for their unique accomplishments and creative contributions display not one but three clusters of traits:

- above average, *though not necessarily superior*, general ability;
- task commitment—the capacity to choose a job or an interest and stick with it; and
- creativity—the capacity to generate diverse, often novel products and solutions to problems.

These three clusters interact as “equal partners” in giftedness, which must, finally, be manifest in some form of valued activity.

Contrary to popular belief, however, neither these component characteristics nor their sum—giftedness—is magically bestowed upon a person in the same way that nature endows one with blue eyes, red hair, or a dark complexion. Whatever the genetic contribution to giftedness may be, an individual’s environment plays a major role in the ultimate expression of abilities. Almost all human abilities can be developed to some extent, and the potentially gifted (those who could achieve excellence under the right conditions) as well as those who are conspicuously talented need and deserve support.

The revolving door model not only allows for the development of latent giftedness, it acknowledges that both areas and degrees of giftedness vary within the individual. Giftedness is not something a person has all the time or not at all. Rather, people display “gifted behavior” at particular times and in specific content areas. Some youngsters, for example, may be gifted in mathematics but not in language arts. Others may be gifted in music or industrial arts but not in science or social studies. However, an important fact must be kept in mind: Good test-taking and lesson-learning abilities do not guarantee that a student will combine these talents with task commitment and creativity to excel in any other area.

Drawing Realistic Lines

Special programs for the gifted have necessarily limited enrollments. Financial planners establish number or percentage ceilings to ensure that there is sufficient money to support the students involved. Enrollment ceilings also keep the number of students in reasonable proportion to the number of teachers and other resources available.

Although it acknowledges the need for certain enrollment limitations, the revolving door model offers an alternative to the traditional method of selecting or rejecting a student for all subjects and for an entire school year.

Consider the traditional approach as it works in this example: Your school’s population is 250. The limit set on the gifted and talented program is 5 percent of the population. Thus, 13 students, generally the highest scorers on IQ tests, are chosen to enjoy a year of special services.

Now consider the revolving door concept: Think about the same program in terms of 13 “slots” rather than 13 preselected pupils. Even though no more than 13 children can use the resource room at once, many times that number of students can move in and out of the program according to their needs. If a student demonstrates giftedness while studying a particular topic or subject, the student will be able to pursue that topic for a given period of time under the direction of the resource teacher. The student will go to the resource room until his or her project is

completed. Then the student will “step aside” to make room for another child. If, however, the student displays new creative ideas or task commitment in another area of interest or leading to advanced research about the original topic, an additional determination will be made as to whether or not the child should continue to have access to the resource room. The revolving door approach does not mandate a complete turnover of the group on a regular basis. Certain students may indeed be allowed to attend the resource room all (or almost all) of the time.

Selecting Students

Most of the information used in traditional procedures for identifying the gifted is data gathered *prior* to the time a child enters a program. In most cases, teachers following the revolving door model, however, use a kind of “action information” in addition to the usual objective and subjective “status information” to help them make decisions about which students are eligible for a program. Action information is difficult to define because it cannot be gathered, recorded, and held as data to aid in making decisions. Action information describes the dynamic interactions that take place when a student becomes “turned on” to a particular topic, area of study, issue, event or form of creative expression. It provides the teacher with reason to believe a child might like to pursue a particular area in greater depth. And although spotting action information requires a great deal of sensitivity, it is precisely this kind of information that helps identify the youngsters who have the greatest potential for benefiting from supplementary services.

The revolving door approach also uses a contractlike plan to provide exit criteria. The plan can be used to help students define a problem, formulate objectives, locate and organize appropriate resources, and identify relevant outlets and audiences for their work. Once a contract has been fulfilled, a child’s participation in the special program is either terminated or reviewed. Since each plan summarizes a major activity carried out under the direction of the resource teacher, it can also be used for evaluation purposes and for reporting to parents. A good collection of these plans is powerful documentation of a resource teacher’s and students’ activities. This kind of evidence is a much more appropriate reflection of student growth than is so-called hard data obtained from standardized tests.

Earning the Opportunity

A main difference between the revolving door approach and the traditional method of having the same students in a special program for an entire year is that there is a specific reason for each child (or small group of children working on a common problem) to be in the program for several weeks to several months. In some ways, this approach requires that a child “earn the opportunity” to obtain special services by demonstrating some or all of the “necessary ingredients” of giftedness.

The revolving door approach to identification and programming also helps ensure the *continuous* involvement of regular classroom teachers. Traditionally, regular and special programs operate as separate entities, and it is not uncommon for regular classroom teachers to “forget” about advanced expressions of ability once children are placed in gifted programs. The revolving door approach, however, requires the regular classroom teacher to be constantly alert for signs of interest, creativity, task commitment and advanced expressions of ability on the part

of students. Such teachers are “talent spotters” who can also become involved by providing certain kinds of enrichment experiences within the regular classroom. These experiences, along with the child’s interactions with the regular curriculum, become occasions for spotting children who will use the resource room to best advantage.

The revolving door approach can also help overcome one of the main deficiencies of special programs that rely on an itinerant or resource room teacher. Most resource teachers are not resources—they are teachers in the traditional sense, conducting predetermined, prescribed lessons for the entire group. If resource teachers want to become real resources to gifted and talented children, then they must drastically reduce the amount of time they spend “teaching lessons” to a full class. Instead, the teacher-as-resource should work with individuals or small groups of students to help them refine an area of interest into a research problem, find appropriate methodologies for pursuing the problem and obtain appropriate advanced-level resources (persons, equipment, reference materials, financial support). The resource teacher can also provide critical feedback and encouragement.

The major responsibility for the effectiveness of the revolving door model, however, rests with the regular classroom teacher, who must be willing as well as able to spot and relay action information. Unfortunately, for both obvious and subtle reasons, programs for the gifted are frequently seen as a threat by certain teachers. In the all-or-nothing model, student selection and referral for special programs are often beyond the control of classroom teachers. But in the revolving door model, the regular classroom teacher is an integral part of the system and should be trained to acquire the skills she needs to make the revolving door concept a successful practice. The effectiveness of the model, after all, depends on teachers who are cooperative and enthusiastic about the approach.

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