Unthinkable Thoughts: Education of Gifted Students

James J. Gallagher
The University of North Carolina—Chapel Hill

A B S T R A C T

The advent of a new millennium is an appropriate time to consider some “unthinkable thoughts,” those thoughts that make us so uncomfortable that most professionals prefer to ignore them. Yet, if progress is to be made, such challenges to our professional roles must be confronted. Four such ugly questions are considered for gifted education, together with suggested actions to cope with them.

1. Is there really such an entity as a gifted child?
2. Is there such an entity as gifted education?
3. Is there such an entity as special personnel preparation for teachers of gifted students?
4. Is the application of special services for gifted students sufficient in scope and intensity to make a difference in the classroom?

We should recognize that, however we choose to cope with these issues, our status quo, business as usual, is hardly a viable choice for the 21st century.

The beginning of a new millennium is an excellent time to take stock and review where we are in this professional field of education of gifted students and where we should be going. One of the ways to engage ourselves is to consider a few unthinkable thoughts, those questions that are so painful for professionals to consider that there is often a conspiracy of silence about them, an unspoken agreement that we would not, as professionals in the field, bring these questions up in polite company (Gallagher, 1984). While it is understandable that we would wish to avoid painful questions, it is not in the best interest of our special field to do so.

This paper is an attempt to confront some major and significant questions regarding the core beliefs within the field of educating gifted students. We will consider four major questions that are indeed unthinkable thoughts to most of us in the education of gifted students, together with what the author believes should be the actions to follow.

First of all, we should recognize that if the answer to question number one is “no,” then the rest of the discussion is rather meaningless. Similarly, if the answer to question number two is “no,” then points three and four lose their meaning. So, it becomes of some significance to confront each of these questions, which have been posed by a variety of critics and friends, in turn.

Is There Such an Entity as a Gifted Child?

The Question

One of the first questions is whether high intelligence is the property of the individual, or merely the favorable confluence of circumstances that allows one youngster to make full use of his or her talents while other youngsters are stunted in their true potential. Renzulli and Reis (1997) prefer, for exam-
ple, to discuss “gifted behaviors” rather than gifted individuals. Their Schoolwide Enrichment Model is designed to stimulate the problem solving and thinking skills of all students, and they reject “giftedness as a state of being” (p. 140) instead preferring to use *gifted* as an adjective, rather than a noun.

Critics such as Sapon-Shevin (1996) and Oakes (1985) have made the point that “giftedness” is a *social construct* and not a separate entity of nature. One can be gifted in Sweden, but not in Botswana. Yes, the gifted child is a social construct of the West. But, so are constructs such as “learning disabilities,” “social competency,” “athletic ability,” and so forth. They, too, were all created for some meaningful social or educational purpose. Actually, it is not the social construct aspect of this term that bothers many critics, but whether the social construct is educationally useful or not (Borland, 1997).

Are there youngsters who, at birth, have a neurological constitution that allows them to learn faster, remember more, process information more effectively, and generate more new and unusual ideas than their age peers? These are important features in the information age. There are two major lines of evidence here. The first lies in twin studies and the close relationship of the abilities of adoptive children to the abilities of their natural parents (Plomin, 1997). The studies of identical and fraternal twins clearly indicate a powerful genetic influence in intelligence. Even when identical twins are reared apart (Bouchard, Lykken, McGue, Segal, & Tellegen, 1990), their IQ correlations are in the .70 to .75 range. At the same time, adoption studies also indicate the important role that nurturing plays (Bouchard & McGue, 1981). The second line of evidence for the existence of constitutional giftedness lies in the undeniable presence of prodigies (Morelock & Feldman, 1997), youngsters who do remarkable things before the age of 10 at the level of an adult professional (i.e., an eight-year-old playing competitive chess with adults). Although families play a role in enhancing this early ability it is impossible to assign such remarkable gifts solely to environmental factors (Gallagher & Gallagher, 1994).

So, we can conclude there is evidence to support the following statement: There are some youngsters who are born with the capability to learn faster than others those ideas or concepts that modern societies value in children and adults. Such youngsters and their abilities are subject to many social influences and must interact with their environmental context. Therefore, it often becomes difficult to find students with these special talents in a multicultural society (Baldwin, 1994; Frasier, 1991).

The real objection to the term *gifted* is not that it is a social construct, but that it is a social construct designed with what are perceived as nefarious purposes, in particular, favoring already economically favored children and families. The consequence of this advantage might be suppressing or limiting the capabilities of youngsters from less socially favored circumstances (Margolin, 1996; Oakes & Lipton, 1992). One consequence of the use of intelligence test results in identification is that there is a disproportion in membership in the special programs for gifted students that reflects this “unfairness,” with fewer Black and Hispanic students enrolled than their proportions in the population, but also with an excess of Asian students in programs for gifted to their proportions in the population (Gallagher & Gallagher, 1994). Such findings call into question our current procedures and have stimulated a search for alternative identification policies (Frasier, 1997).

One of the major initiatives in the field of gifted education has been attempts to discover and nurture hidden talent (Baldwin, 1994; Patton, 1992). The federal Javits legislation has spurred these efforts. In addition, states like Illinois, Ohio, Texas, North Carolina, and Georgia have made major changes in their identification procedures and policies designed to discover the talented child from cultural backgrounds different from the American mainstream (Coleman, Gallagher, & Foster, 1994).

The obvious gradations in the construct of intelligence and its multiple dimensions in students cause many critics to complain about the “all-or-nothing” aspect of being in “a gifted program” and the unfairness of failing to take into account these gradations of ability or multiple abilities (Pendarvis & Howley, 1996). This objection ignores the fact that many educational decisions are also of a similar all-or-nothing nature. You are either on the basketball team or you are not, despite obvious gradations in athletic ability and skill. You are either in a music program at Julliard or you are not, despite obvious gradations in musical talent. You are either accepted into a special school of math and science or you are not, despite gradations in student interest and ability.

**Actions Based on Current Knowledge**

The process of the identification of gifted students in educational programs was originally for the purpose of establishing eligibility for special programs and obtaining financial reimbursement for local districts from the state. Now that state reimbursement for local districts has often been placed on the basis of a formula that places a cap on available state resources (e.g., 4% of average daily attendance) rather than on an individual head count of gifted students, the need for such individual identification as a gifted student has been lessened.

We need to establish rules of eligibility for specific advanced programs in content fields that take advantage of the advanced mental abilities and achievement levels of gifted students, such as an advanced math program or a problem-based learning unit in social studies, where eligibility could be determined through multiple criteria including aptitude, aca-
demic track record, and interest. Eligibility for specific services, programs, or classes has already been established as the pattern at the secondary level in Advanced Placement courses and Honors programs where eligibility standards may include general intellectual aptitude as one of a number of admission criteria. This multiple selection criteria also fits well into Howard Gardner’s (Ramos-Ford & Gardner, 1997) multiple intelligences framework in that high math aptitude can place a student in the advanced math program, but not necessarily make him or her eligible for a special creative arts programs.

Is There Such an Entity as Gifted Education?

The Question

What is the special character of programs for gifted students? Are they exciting? Yes. Are they boring and trivial? Yes. Do they discriminate against minorities? Yes. Do they fight discrimination? Yes. The truth of the matter is that any statement made about programs or services for gifted students (or anyone else) in this diverse country is partially true. What we really need to focus upon is how much truth there is in particular claims and what can be done to make the programs more positive in nature.

Are there identifiable special or differentiated programs for gifted students? The answer to this question is not nearly so clear, nor is the nature of differentiation. Differentiation can refer to changes from the basic curriculum in content, in skills, in learning environments, and even in technology. Is our differentiated program based upon content (history or math), or upon special skills (problem solving or creativity)? Surely it is not sufficient to refer to the geographic place where gifted students are (resource room, regular class, special class, etc.) as the differentiation. Presumably they are in a special place to allow for something different and distinctive to happen in the curriculum. If they sit in a different place but are given the same inappropriate curriculum as they would confront in the general classroom, why should we expect that anything of educational importance will happen (Kulik & Kulik, 1997)?

Is a differential program actually needed? The voices of the gifted students themselves provide persuasive testimony. More than 800 gifted students from nine separate school districts in North Carolina were asked to comment on whether they were being challenged by their current content courses in mathematics, science, social studies, and language arts (Gallagher, Harradine, & Coleman, 1997). Only mathematics and their special classes in gifted education were able to get over 50% approval in this regard. Student comments focused on the redundancy of the curriculum and the low level of thought required, which then triggered many statements of student boredom.

In his critique of gifted education, Margolin (1996) does not believe that the program focus is content, stating that a review of gifted textbooks revealed only 11% of the pages in the textbooks are concerned with the content of the lessons. The examples of trivial and irrelevant lessons presented by Margolin, as well as Sawyer (1988), on what goes on in gifted classes leaves one to wonder what parents in their right minds would want their child in such a program. Margolin’s view is that it is not the content of the lessons that is important, but the privilege and status of the term gifted that drives parents to insist that their child be provided with these services or programs (and this label!).

Is it high-level thinking processes that we wish to cultivate that comprises the differentiated program? As Callahan (1996) has pointed out, this goal seems to presume that the regular classroom teacher is not concerned with the stimulation of thinking skills of her students, an obvious misrepresentation. It is certainly true that the development of thinking skills, such as problem solving, problem finding, and creativity, often play a significant role in what is “differentiated” (Treffinger & Feldhusen, 1996).

Sapon-Shevin (1996) has a different reason for attacking gifted education. It is not that it is bad education, but that it is so good! “The benefits provided by such programs—smaller classes, more enthusiastic teachers, a rich curriculum, more individualization—are all changes that would benefit all students” (p. 199). By providing that type of program to the children of the wealthy and the well-positioned in our society, Sapon–Shevin believes that we increase the gap between gifted students and the economically disadvantaged students. So, education for the gifted becomes, to her, a device to maintain these unfair cultural advantages.

We can hardly deny that there are some parents who would be willing to see the public education ship sink if their children were provided the lifeboats of a gifted program, but, to claim that this is the primary reason why thousands of parents and teachers support and work in programs for gifted students is to be extremely naïve. Nevertheless, we still have the responsibility to state clearly just what we are about when we say we are “differentiating” the program for gifted students, in addition to what outcomes we expect and what outcomes we have obtained (Gallagher, 1998).

One of the important questions to raise in education of gifted students—and in all of education—is, “Are the practices that we are using beneficial, or do they just represent established practice that, through repetition, becomes the established way of doing things?” Shore and his colleagues (Shore, Cornell, Robinson, & Ward, 1991) produced a volume on Recommended Practices in Gifted Education: A Critical Analysis that
identified 101 widely advocated practices for educating gifted students. They also did a detailed literature review to indicate which of these had research backing and which did not. As a follow-up on this effort, Shore and Delcourt (1996) included more recent studies in their analysis and reached the following conclusion (summarized in Table 1) about effective education programs. Table 1 represents those policies that research indicates result in more favorable outcomes for gifted students. Although some of these (grouping, acceleration, high-level content) would seem to apply particularly to gifted students, such things as well-trained teachers, thinking processes, and microcomputers would seem to be beneficial for all students. These practices include elements of changing learning environments, content, and skills, supporting the goal of curriculum differentiation.

One of the mistakes we have made in the past has been to treat the broad spectrum of giftedness as one entity in our programming or service design. There is good reason to believe that the far high end of the distribution of intelligence requires something different than what is provided for the gifted students who are merely somewhat superior in learning ability to the average student. If we can speak of the “highly gifted,” then I believe these rare students (perhaps less than 1% of the total) should be the instructional responsibility of the specialist in gifted education, rather than the general education teacher. The distance between these quite special youngsters and the average student of the same chronological age now becomes too great for the regular teacher to fold this student into the general curriculum. Whereas the “run-of-the-mill” gifted student may be dealt with by the support system we have described here, the highly gifted student needs more individual attention, perhaps by providing tutoring, acceleration, or planning individualized studies and projects.

Actions Based on Current Knowledge

The critiques leveled against the triviality and irrelevance of some of our “differentiated” programs for gifted students need to be taken seriously. General education teachers and teachers of gifted students both need models of differentiated units that stress advanced content and mastery of thinking processes, such as those developed by VanTassel-Baska (1997) in science and Gallagher and Stepien (1998) in social studies (see also Stepien & Gallagher, 1993), to help them challenge their students. The movement toward establishing content standards in general education requires the specialists in gifted education to add to these standards what would be standards plus that would represent differentiated content for gifted students.

For example, the National Science Education Standards (Klausner, 1996) propose that, in life science in grades 5–8, “all students should develop understanding of structure and function in living systems, reproduction and heredity, regulation and behavior, populations and ecosystems and diversity and adaptations of organisms” (p. 155). Within those broad areas there are many opportunities for scientific inquiry and individual or group projects to challenge gifted students beyond the level expected of all students. This would require a consistent application of a type of curriculum compacting (Reis & Renzulli, 1992) so that gifted students could demonstrate that they have met the general standards for their grade level and would then either address the standards for advanced grades or become involved in genuine enrichment adventures based upon the general course curriculum.

This does not mean that there should not also be continued attention given to special efforts at enhancing creativity, problem solving, problem-based learning, and the like (Treffinger & Feldhusen, 1996), but that the mastery of these skills has to relate to significant and relevant content in order to be meaningful and useful to the student.

Is There Such an Entity as Special Personnel Preparation for Teachers of Gifted Students?

The Question

One of the most often-presented strategies for educational improvement for gifted students is sophisticated personnel preparation where teachers and leadership personnel, who will be dealing with children who are gifted and talented, are given special preparation for presenting and organizing services and curriculum for these students. It is this preparation that creates the “specialist,” since this preparation is most often applied on top of some general education certification at the elementary, middle, or secondary level. The unthinkable thought is that such preparation is often haphazard and superficial, consisting of a summer workshop here, a three-day conference there, hardly justifying the term specialist. Although rules have been suggested for extended educational experience in this area (Parker, 1996; Council for Exceptional Children [CEC], 1995), most of the state standards expect the teacher to be learning about the characteristics of gifted students, differentiating curriculum for such students, studying about intelligence and higher thinking processes, plus a supervised practicum. Whatever additional preparation the teacher of gifted students is able to find is too often strictly on her or his own (Feldhusen, 1997).

Let us first consider our role as “specialist” in the field of education. We need to answer the question: What can we do that others in education cannot, for is that not the definition
Table 1

**Desirable Practices in Gifted and General Education**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Uniquely Appropriate for Gifted Education</th>
<th>Effective with Gifted and General</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Acceleration</td>
<td>Enrichment</td>
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<tr>
<td>Career education (girls)</td>
<td>Inquiry, discovery,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ability grouping</td>
<td>problem solving,</td>
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<tr>
<td>High level curriculum</td>
<td>and creativity</td>
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<td>Differential Programming</td>
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<td>Microcomputers</td>
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... of a specialist? If we are psychologists, we can give tests that no other professional can do. If we are pediatricians, we can prescribe medicine when other professionals cannot. If we are teachers of children who are deaf, we can teach American Sign Language. Or, if we are teachers of children with visual impairments, we can teach travel and Braille. Each of these skills is more or less unique and distinguishes the specialist. Our specialty appears to rest in our energizing thinking skills and strategies for differentiating curriculum.

When we ask where these specialists are being prepared in gifted education, we get a discouraging diversity of experiences from higher education courses, to workshops, to staff development, to conference participation. It is this kind of haphazard record of personnel preparation that has motivated, in part, the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards to question the actual presence of a “specialty” of gifted education (J. Kelly, personal communication, 1996).

**Actions Based on Current Knowledge**

We need to take the critique of the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards seriously when they raise doubts about the legitimate existence of a teaching specialization in gifted education. We need to be clear on what the special knowledges and skills are that are needed by such specialists (Baldwin, 1994; Feldhusen, 1997; Gallagher & Gallagher, 1994; Parker, 1987; VanTassel-Baska, 1997).

Certainly, this specialist must have the skills to develop differentiated lessons and units that stress complex ideas and conceptual systems, and that means the specialist should have content sophistication in some content area or areas (e.g., history, math, economics, etc.). She or he should have extensive knowledge of the various ways to access information sources so that the students can search effectively for a wide range of information on their projects. He or she should also have a fundamental grasp of higher thinking processes and how these can be utilized in instruction, be able to collaborate with general education teachers in enriching the program for advanced students in the general classroom, and, finally, be able to do some individual mentoring for those extraordinary students who are clearly three or more grades in advance of their age group.

So, the key questions are, where will this personnel preparation take place and under whose guidance? Although a few higher education centers have established some basis for such training, most of this preparation will have to be executed in organized staff development programs at a state and local level. An example of this approach is illustrated in the module strategy designed by Harrison, Coleman, and Howard (1994), who transformed the North Carolina certification standards into a state-approved series of 10-hour modules that can be delivered at the local level by university and experienced school system personnel. By assembling these modules, the teachers can eventually earn certification in gifted education.

It should be the task of leaders in state departments of education and professional associations such as TAG and NAGC to set standards and help organize systematic and sequential experiences for on-the-line teachers. The Association for the Gifted (TAG) has tried to develop a statement on what teachers of students with gifts and talents should know (What Every Special Educator Must Know, CEC, 1995), and the National Association for Gifted Children (NAGC) has developed potential standards for graduate education, as well (Parker, 1996). Nevertheless, it will take a major effort on the part of the professional community to design and, in some fashion, produce a personnel preparation package that can be delivered at a local or regional level by qualified personnel that would lead to a form of advanced certification for teachers of gifted students.

**Is the Application of Special Services for Gifted Students Sufficient in Scope and Intensity to Make a Difference in the Classroom?**

**The Question**

There has been a relatively widespread practice in programs that provide special services for gifted students to set...
aside some instructional time for the student to interact with a specially trained teacher. While that could mean a couple of half-days a week, or an hour a day, it very often, in local systems, means less (i.e., merely an hour to an hour and a half per week) in some instances.

What can a teacher do in that hour and a half per week (probably broken into two 45 minute blocks) that can make up for 23-1/2 hours per week spent in a regular program with a curriculum that may not be appropriate for the student’s needs? Should they ask the students to read a special book? How about a library project that lasts for a month (that would be six hours worth)? Why do we put up with such obviously nonfunctional educational adjustments? Such assignments are “justified” in terms of limited budgets and an attempt by harried educational administrators to stretch available resources to the limit. Although one can have sympathy for the hard-pressed administrator, such limited time allocations come perilously close to educational fraud. In essence, we are promising something we cannot deliver.

Consider the following scenario in the field of medicine. A doctor prescribes 50 mg of cortisone for a student with asthma attacks. The pharmacist notes that there are many students needing asthma medicine and he is running short of cortisone, so he regretfully gives the student a 5 mg pill instead of the 50 mg pill the doctor prescribed. Would the doctor passively shrug his shoulders and say, “Well, that’s the way it goes,” or would you likely hear a roar of outrage that the doctor’s patient was being given a nontherapeutic dosage contrary to his or her professional instructions?

Well, we are the doctors of education, quite literally. Should our answer be, “Well, what can you do?” or “That’s the way it goes,” or should we speak out against a practice, a nontherapeutic educational dosage, that no one can really defend as good education for gifted students, but that many of us tolerate through our silence? Should not guidelines be created for what is the “minimum” amount of contact time that one needs for any expected gain or benefit?

The answer of our specialists in gifted education often comes back: “Well, we agree this short-changing of students is terrible, but what can just one person do about such policies as the ‘hour-a-week’ gifted program?” Well, this one person often belongs to a large professional organization, and collectively such groups could at least consider setting minimal standards in terms of sheer contact time. Then, we could suggest such standards as necessary to get the TAG or NAGC Seal of Approval. Anything less than that minimum time commitment would be considered unprofessional. If such standards were presented in journals, such as Parenting for High Potential, the parents of gifted students might be interested in them.

There is a similar issue related to the amount of time that a specialist in gifted education can provide to the general education classroom teacher. The growing popularity of the policy of inclusion for gifted students in the regular classroom has been supported on the grounds that a gifted specialist can come into that classroom and provide some extra activities for gifted students, or for cluster groups of high-ability students. But, how much time should that specialist spend in any one classroom? Is one hour every two weeks sufficient to get some sort of meaningful gain or improvement? Maybe an hour a week?

Again, most of the policies that determine the time available for the interaction of general education teachers and specialists in gifted education are driven by economics rather than good educational practice or theory. The question is, do we collectively have an obligation to say something about these practices? Are there minimum time standards that we are ready to defend as proper professional behavior? If we do not stand up to the economic arguments of the “bottom line,” then who will? Is this minimal use of special consultants just another case of educational fraud about which we stand silent? Why do we not say so?

**Actions Based on Current Knowledge**

This final issue calls for establishment of, and publicity for, some minimum standards of time commitments to services for gifted students. For example, can anyone accept less than three hours per week of direct contact with a specialist as a minimum for a viable program for gifted students? Anyone making such an argument should be asked, at least, to provide some tangible evidence of the attainments of gifted students under such questionable circumstances. The minimum standard might include no less than five hours per week with a support person in general education classrooms (this time would include consultation with the classroom teacher, direct work with cluster groups within the classroom, resource room activities, and individual work with extremely gifted students).

Such standards would avoid the predictable assignment of specialists in gifted education to multiple school buildings and a schedule that results in minimal contact with students or teachers in any one place. Such an exercise in negative educational economics can result in another set of “ghost programs,” the “nontherapeutic dose” where parents are told something constructive is happening for their child that cannot possibly happen, given the limited time and availability of educators of gifted students.

**Status quo as Option?**

Whatever the personal reaction of the readers to these “unthinkable thoughts” and the accompanying suggestions
for action, there should be little hesitation in agreeing that the status quo is not a viable option. We need to organize ourselves for significant changes in how we deal with the painful issues described above and perhaps many more. In the 21st century, we should be able to say proudly that we saw our limitations and took action against them. Much of this action must be done collectively since we, as individuals, are hardly able to make major institutional changes. It is unlikely that higher education, awash with many other issues, will take the lead here. It is clearly the responsibility of our professional associations to take the leadership on these issues. The truly unthinkable thought is that we would continue to go on the way we have been without some recognition of the need for change.

References


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College Gifted Programs  
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http://www.cgp-sig.com  
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