Programs for gifted kids get failing grade from educational psychology researchers

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Broad definitions, vague criteria and inconsistent standards make it challenging for teachers to deliver programs to gifted students, say two UAlberta researchers. Credit: Faculty of Education

Researchers from the University of Alberta's Faculty of Education looking to improve programs for gifted elementary school students have

instead called into question the way gifted children are identified, evaluated and taught in Alberta.

George Georgiou, a professor in the Department of Educational Psychology, and his graduate student Kristy Dunn evaluated 113 students coded as gifted and enrolled in enrichment programs in Edmonton schools, hoping to identify their cognitive strengths. Instead, the researchers found that inconsistent criteria and evaluation, along with very diverse cognitive profiles between students, undermined efforts to deliver programming to these students. Interestingly, only 18 (15.9 per cent) of these children had a full scale IQ higher than 130 (a standard score used by most researchers to select intellectually gifted children).

"We have seen a lot of news coming out saying that gifted students are the most neglected children, that they are stigmatized and so forth," Georgiou says. "When we started looking deeper into this, I thought we were doing something good for these kids. But they're so heterogeneous as a group that, unless we tailor any intervention program to the needs of these children, we cannot improve their performance. If our gifted children are not supported now to help them reach their full potential, this can pose a serious threat to the future success of our society, province and country. "

The problem starts, Georgiou says, with how giftedness is defined.

"Potential" problem

"Code 80, provided by Alberta Education, indicates that giftedness is exceptional potential or performance across a wide range of abilities in one or more of the following areas: general intellectual, specific academic, creative thinking, social, musical, artistic, and kinesthetic—so it's a very broad definition that really doesn't help anyone, particularly the teachers," he says, noting that words such as "potential" can be

interpreted in multiple ways by different people.

"In terms of differences between school board definitions, school definitions and provincial definitions, Ontario is the only province with formal legislation around procedures for providing programming to gifted students," adds Dunn, whose research is informed by her experience as a teacher in gifted programs. "A step-by-step approach in identifying gifted children simply doesn't exist, so schools in Alberta are left to decide what their identification process is and what their criteria are."

Broad definitions, vague criteria and variations in assessment standards mean that there is little differentiation between good students and the small percentage who are truly exceptional. And that creates challenges for teachers, who are given no formal instruction on delivering programs to gifted students.

"Ideally, gifted students should constitute one per cent of the population. We're talking about the really exceptional children. That corresponds to a full scale IQ score of 140 or above," Georgiou says. "But if you look at our schools, some accept children who score higher than 120, some accept children who score higher than 125 and some accept children who score higher than 130. If you compare children in the 140 range to those in the 120 range, they're not the same. Clearly, this has implications for their instruction."

Moreover, an intellectually gifted child is not necessarily also academically gifted. This is something teachers often forget to consider and results in situations in which, for example, an intellectually gifted child is asked to do advanced mathematics when their math performance is in the average range, Georgiou says.

"Having a classroom of students who have an IQ of 150 compared to

those with an IQ in the 120 range is very difficult for a teacher to successfully program for," Dunn says.

This lack of capacity to tailor lessons in a classroom full of gifted students with differing aptitudes and abilities isn't just frustrating for teachers.

"What many of the teachers do, if you are a Grade 4 gifted child, is to give you Grade 5 or 6 work or more of the same work being done in Grade 4," Georgiou says. "So many of these kids, when you ask them, feel bored. Why would you feel motivated if you go into this class and you are just asked to do more work?"

The researchers say a fresh approach to identifying and teaching gifted students is needed, proceeding from the understanding that giftedness is not a monolithic category, but a catch-all term for a variety of cognitive assets that not all exceptional students will have in common.

"We need to reconsider the whole issue of giftedness and invite multiple stakeholders—policy-makers, professors, parents and teachers. What we are doing right now is not making a difference for our gifted students," Georgiou says. "Once we have a clear idea of what giftedness is and acceptable criteria for identifying these kids, then we need to invest time and effort on what we are doing with these kids. It has to be specific, and any intervention program should be developed with the characteristics of these distinct groups in mind."

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