ACADEMIC TALENT DEVELOPMENT: THEORY & PRACTICE

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A WORD OF CAUTION

○ This proposal will not be immediately applicable in most school districts.
○ But, as Nelson Mandela once said:
  • “A policy that is impractical will fail, and one that lacks ideals is unworthy.”
○ In other words, there is a middle ground between Idealism and Cynicism:
  ‘Optimistic realism’

ESSENTIAL MESSAGE

There is a huge gap between what “real” Academic Talent Development should be, and what talented students actually receive in most current “gifted programs.”
Academic Talent Development (ATD) is the transformation of outstanding intellectual gifts into outstanding academic talent.
TONGUE IN CHEEK...

Talent development is a process in search of a product.

TWO CRUCIAL BASES

☉ A PSYCHOLOGICAL base
  - Large individual differences in aptitude give rise to large differences in educational needs.

☉ A LEGAL base
  - The acknowledged “rights of children” (which are too often given lip service!)

![Graph showing progression over time with grades and time axes]
"The kind of schools we need would not hold as an ideal that all students get to the same destinations at the same time. They would embrace the idea that good schools increase the variance in student performance and at the same time escalate the mean."

"In an ideal approach to educational practice, each youngster would learn at an ideal rate...Over time, the cumulative gap between students would grow. Students would travel at their own optimal rates."

(Eisner, 2002, p. 580)

**THE RIGHTS OF CHILDREN (1)**

UN: Declaration of the rights of the child (1959)

**Principle 7**

(United Nations, November 20, 1959)

- The child is entitled to...an education which will...enable him...to develop his abilities, his individual judgement, and his sense of moral and social responsibility...
- The best interests of the child shall be the guiding principle of those responsible for his education and guidance...
THE RIGHTS OF CHILDREN (2)

Convention on the rights of the child
(United Nations, November 20, 1989)
Excerpt from Article 29
« States Parties agree that the education of the child shall be directed to:
(a) The development of the child's personality, talents and mental and physical abilities to their fullest potential; »

THE RIGHTS OF CHILDREN (3)

Convention on the rights of the child
(United Nations, November 20, 1989)
Excerpt from PREAMBLE
“The United Nations...has proclaimed and agreed that everyone is entitled to all the rights and freedoms set forth therein, without distinction of any kind, such as race, colour, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin, property, birth or other status.”
FORMAL DEFINITION OF TD

*Talent development (TD)* is:
the systematic pursuit by ‘talentees,’
over a significant period of time,
of an enriched program of activities,
towards a specific excellence goal.

ABOUT “TALENTEEES”

- It is a neologism
- Definition:
  Any person actively involved in developing
  one or more talents.
- Analogous to: conferee, enrollee, franchisee,
  mentee, promisee, refugee, etc.
- It applies to any field of occupation.

FORMAL DEFINITION OF ATD

*Academic Talent development (ATD)*
is the systematic pursuit by talentees,
over a significant period of time,
of an enriched (K-12) curriculum
towards a specific excellence goal.
EIGHT ATD CHARACTERISTICS

1. Enriched (K-12) curriculum
2. Long-term excellence goal
3. Selective access
4. Early involvement
5. Systematic & regular (daily) practice
6. Ability grouping
7. Performance-based assessment
8. Personalized pacing

CHARACTERISTIC # 1

Enriched curriculum (process)

- Enrichment = TD-related 'differentiation'.
- Based on the ‘normal’ K-12 curriculum.
- Rationale: Ease & speed in learning.
- KEystone of any ‘real’ ATD provision.
- Priority to Enrichment in Density:
  - “Thou shalt condense…foremost!” (VI)

CHARACTERISTIC # 2

Long-term excellence goal (product)

- Excellence goal
  - Within the K-12 academic curriculum
  - A normative concept: ≠ from “personal bests”
- Long-term involvement
  - Macro-perspective: year(s), but…
  - …not necessarily an ultimate goal
CHARACTERISTIC # 3

Selective access
 Follows logically from # 1 (enrichment).
 How many? Aim for top 10%.
 If possible, use a generous initial approach.
 Procedure: focus on demonstrated TA.
 Maintain openness to self-selection.

CHARACTERISTIC # 4

Early involvement
 Principle: Precocity appears...precociously.
 Recall the Fifth Commandment:
  • “Thou shalt intervene...earliestly!”
 Common in most fields (e.g., arts & sports)
 Plan special approach for late bloomers.

CHARACTERISTIC # 5

Systematic & regular (daily) practice
 Goal: maintain continual challenge.
  • Think of Vygotsky’s “zone of proximal development”.
 Sub-goal: avoid marking time (a staple ‘thorn’ with the regular curriculum).
 ‘Daily’ because schooling is a daily activity.
CHARACTERISTIC # 6

Ability grouping
- Follows logically from # 1 and # 5.
- The most effective and efficient way to deliver daily enrichment.
- Research has proven that regular classroom enrichment is a "Mission Impossible".

CHARACTERISTIC # 7

Performance-based assessment
- Focus on achievements (a ‘meritocratic’ approach).
- Relate its contents directly to the students’ excellence goals.
- Assess the rate/pace of PROGRESS, using both ipsative and normative indices:
  - Ipsative: compare to pre-defined personal goal.
  - Normative: compare to peer talentees.

CHARACTERISTIC # 8

Personalized pacing
- Acknowledge significant individual differences within the talentee population.
- Goal: maintain continual challenge.
  - Vygotsky’s “zone of proximal development”.
- Openness to accelerative enrichment:
  - “Thou shalt accelerate...as neededly!” (VII)
EIGHT ATD CHARACTERISTICS

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“REAL” ATD PROGRAMS

A “real” ATD PROGRAM will include all eight characteristics. None, by itself, is sufficient; all are necessary.

‘PROVISIONS’ vs. ‘PROGRAM’

◆ ATD PROVISION/SERVICE:
  • Any educational activity that contains an enrichment component.
    (ex. Early entrance, curriculum compacting, summer courses, grade skipping, honors classes, AP courses, etc.)

◆ ATD PROGRAM:
  • A set of ATD provisions sequentially structured to cover an extended part of the K-12 educational system.
THE REALITY OF ATD

Pull-out classes
Regular classroom enrichment

PULL-OUT CLASSES (1)

Description
- ½ day out-of-classroom activities.
- Special teacher.
- Content ≠ regular curriculum.
- Mostly enrichment in diversity/depth.
- May last a semester, a year, rarely more.

PULL-OUT CLASSES (2)

Pro
- Public/private “acceptable” solution.
- Usually, high student satisfaction.
- (Much) better than nothing!

Con
- Do not apply # 1 (curriculum), # 2 (long-term excellence goal), & # 5 (daily practice).
- A part-time solution to a full-time need.
- False feeling of having “solved” the problem.
**REGULAR CLASSROOM ENRICHMENT**

- Description
  - Enrichment activities “sometimes” offered by the regular teacher.
  - Some enrichment in density, and diversity, often given to “occupy” fast learners.
- Assessment: 5 major studies
  - 1993: NRCGT survey (n = 4000, grades 3/4)
  - 1993: NRCGT parallel observation study (n = 92)
  - 1997: Australian replication of survey (n = 600)
  - 1998: U.S. middle school survey (n = 1000)
  - 2003: Ten-year NRCGT follow-up survey (n = 550)

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**SUMMARY OF RESULTS**

- Very infrequent ‘enrichment’: at best, once a week on average.
- Little differentiation between high and average achievers: most ‘enrichment’ provisions target the whole group.
- No geographical differences.
- Having a local ‘gifted program’ changes nothing.

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**AUTHORS’ CONCLUSION (1993)**

- “The results of this survey paint a disturbing picture of the types of instructional services gifted students receive in regular classrooms across the United States.
- It is clear from the results that teachers in regular third and fourth grade classrooms make only minor modifications in the curriculum and their instruction to meet the needs of gifted students.”
TYPICAL EXAMPLES OF ATD
- (Nothing systematic in elementary schools)
- Selective high schools: day or boarding
  - Governor’s schools (USA)
  - Selective high schools (NSW, Singapore, etc.)
  - International Baccalaureate (IB) system
- Other (partial) prototypes
  - Advanced Placement (AP) program
  - Mentorships
  - Any form of accelerative enrichment (e.g., early entrance to school, grade skipping)

IMPACT ON TERMINOLOGY
- From “Gifted education” to...
- “Academic Talent Development (ATD)”
- From “Gifted teachers” or “Gifted Ed. teachers” to...
- “Academic Talent Development (ATD) teachers”.
- From Nat. Assoc. for Gifted Children (NAGC)” to...
- National Organization Fostering Academic Talent (NOFAT)
- Or National Association for the Development of Academic Talent (NADAT)

UTOPIAN DREAM?
WHAT ATD COULD LOOK LIKE
MY IDEAL ATD program:

* Would cover the whole K-12 curriculum.
* Would begin with an Early entrance option (K or Gr. 1)
* Would base initial access on both GI and precocious TA
* Would use generous initial selection criteria, with progressive winnowing.
* Would propose challenging institutional excellence goals.
* Would prioritize educational needs, but attend as well to social and emotional adaptation.
* Would maintain talentees’ focus on challenging tasks.

Would condense the curriculum...foremost.

- Would make full use of all four types of enrichment: Density, Difficulty, Depth, Diversity (in that order).
- Would of course group talentees...fulltimely.
- Would regularly assess achievement and review personal goals.
- Would individualize the pacing, leaving room for occasional accelerative enrichment.
- Would foster social involvement, but without any "national resource guilt-trip."

DON’T HOLD YOUR BREATH, IT’S NOT FOR TOMORROW!