Impact of Gifted Programs From the Students' Perspectives
Nancy B. Hertzog

Gifted Child Quarterly 2003 47: 131
DOI: 10.1177/001698620304700204

The online version of this article can be found at:
http://gcq.sagepub.com/content/47/2/131

Published by:
SAGE
http://www.sagepublications.com

On behalf of:
National Association for Gifted Children

Additional services and information for Gifted Child Quarterly can be found at:

Email Alerts: http://gcq.sagepub.com/cgi/alerts
Subscriptions: http://gcq.sagepub.com/subscriptions
Reprints: http://www.sagepub.com/journalsReprints.nav
Permissions: http://www.sagepub.com/journalsPermissions.nav
Citations: http://gcq.sagepub.com/content/47/2/131.refs.html

>> Version of Record - Apr 1, 2003

What is This?
Impact of Gifted Programs
From the Students’ Perspectives

Nancy B. Hertzog
University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

Abstract

Fifty college students were interviewed about their prior experiences in gifted programs and their perspectives on the impact of these experiences on their lives. Interview questions probed the types of experiences they remembered, including the types of instruction they had, their relations with peers, and their views about how their experiences in gifted programs affected other parts of their lives. Data were analyzed qualitatively with additional topics and themes emerging. In this paper, the author shares their voices and discusses the implications of their reports.

Contextual Underpinnings

Gifted education and gifted programs routinely spark controversy in the literature and in the news. Critics accuse gifted programs of inequity and the failure to abide by democratic principles (Sapon-Shevin, 1993). For example, Ford (1995) observed, “Abundant data suggest that gifted programs are the most segregated educational programs in the United States” (p. 52). Since the passing of the Jacob K. Javits Gifted and Talented Students Education Act of 1988, educators in the field of gifted

Putting the Research to Use

This study reveals how 50 college students interpreted the impact of participating in gifted programs on their lives. The students vividly described the learning environments in gifted programs and made suggestions for educators to provide opportunities like they experienced to more students. Educators should note that the students’ descriptions of teachers in gifted programs included the following: The teachers engaged them in high-level thinking, spent less time on discipline, and created a better overall classroom atmosphere in gifted, as compared to general education classes. Most notably, students said that gifted programs gave them a “work ethic” and a “better education.” From this study, educators may glean aspects of gifted programs that can improve education for all students. Policymakers may use the overwhelmingly positive outcomes to advocate for more gifted programs and more training in gifted education. Teachers may use these students’ perceptions to reflect on their own practices and create learning environments that propel students to achieve in all of their classes. Students voiced concerns about segregation and labeling. These are issues that provoke questions for further discussion and research.
education have sought alternative ways to identify gifted children, thereby increasing the number of students from minority populations in gifted programs. However, across the nation, the Federal Office of Civil Rights is investigating the diversity of gifted programs (Brown, 1997). Gifted programs raise social and moral questions. Fenstermacher (1982) wrote on this issue, “It must be recognized by those involved in any aspect of education that any determination to accord different treatment to some subset of a given population is inherently a moral determination” (p. 300). Educators in the field of gifted education must persist in evaluating the effectiveness and impact of gifted programs on the students being served to address the moral dilemmas of the field. Callahan (1996) has urged educators in the field to pursue evaluation studies. She stated,

Failing to document the impact of services has long been a major shortcoming of our field. We have observed changes in students in anecdotal ways, and we have garnered the support of the students’ parents; but we have avoided the collection of systematic data that would provide the uncontested arguments regarding success of our programs. (p. 159)

Several researchers have articulated difficulties with evaluating gifted programs and have cited problems with the existing literature in this area (Callahan, 1992; Carter, 1992; Southern, 1992). According to Miller, “the existing evaluation literature is questionable and ‘only hints at the effects’ of programs and policies” (as cited in Avery & VanTassel-Baska, 1997, p. 125). Miller continued, “While the field of gifted education has advocated evaluation as a central part of program development for a number of years, there is a paucity of studies in the literature to provide insight on what works and what does not work in gifted programs” (p. 124).

Callahan (1992) noted that evaluations of gifted programs have assumed that all children involved in gifted programming would benefit from such programming. She said,

The programming strategies, instructional activities, and evaluation strategies that have been used all assume that one type of program will be equally effective for all gifted students. What may, in fact, be the case is that certain programming strategies and curriculum are effective for certain gifted students having certain characteristics but are not effective for others. (p. 121)

Callahan proposed that qualitative strategies were needed to determine what works for which individuals under which conditions, what the other intervening factors are that influence success, and how the program deals with those factors. Evaluation strategies must provide the opportunity to describe the ways in which gifted students interact with the experiences provided for them, with their teachers, with the way programs are delivered, and with the outcomes they experience. (p. 121)

More importantly, evaluation studies in gifted education should reach beyond specific program goals, implementation, and program effectiveness to the impact of such programs on students’ lives.

Greene (1994) articulated benefits of qualitative methods, saying they “can effectively give voice to the normally silenced and can poignantly illuminate what is typically masked” (p. 531). This qualitative study was designed to give voice to a group of students regarding the impact that being in gifted programs had on their lives.

**Literature Review**

The impact of experiences in gifted programs on individual children has rarely been addressed in the literature. Evaluators have typically assessed the quality of students’ experiences in the gifted program using teacher, administrator, parent, and student questionnaires. These types of studies have served as a means of formative evaluation to help administrators and teachers adjust their instruction or curriculum. Program effectiveness studies have generally been program-specific or have examined specific predicted outcomes such as changes in self-concept, achievement, or future accomplishments. Examining the impact of gifted programs qualitatively and holistically requires an exploration of several different areas of research. Most notably, different lines of research, including longitudinal studies and studies related to the effects of particular program models, are relevant to understanding the complexity and multiplicity of the outcomes that can result from students’ experiences. A glimpse of the relevant research in these areas will be reported here to gain a greater insight into the experiences shared in the students’ reports.

**Longitudinal and Retrospective Studies**

Historically, longitudinal studies have enabled the field of gifted education to examine factors that contributed to an individual’s eminence, talent, or giftedness. Questions that drive longitudinal research center around understanding the factors that lead to very exceptional levels of achievement or talent development. Eminent people studied have generally been too old to have participated in gifted programs that have permeated public education in the United States since the 1970s, and thus, questions that assess the possible benefits or outcomes of gifted education have not been included in this body of literature.

Other types of retrospective studies that are more relevant to this study are those that followed up on students who participated in special programs or talent searches. White and Renzulli’s (1987) retrospective study (as cited...
in Subotnik & Arnold, 1994) of children who had been involved in an enrichment program in New York City from 1935 to 1940 (identified with high IQ) found that the participants attributed a “lifelong love for learning, pleasure in independent work, and joy in interacting with similarly high-ability students” (p. 4) to their program participation.

Subotnik and Steiner’s (1994) longitudinal study of the 1983 Westinghouse Talent Search winners primarily described participants’ experiences subsequent to their involvement in the competition, their career choices, and the relationship between their prior participation in the talent search and their current career. Subotnik and Steiner found that mentors played a key role in whether or not students chose careers in science. They also hypothesized that, for those students who left the science field, “the talents they displayed in science most likely were transferable to other disciplines” (p. 72).

There have been a multitude of studies concerning the Study of Mathematically Precocious Youth (SYMPY), begun by Julian Stanley in the 1980s. Most of these studies examined how students with domain-specific talents developed over time (in this case, aptitude in mathematics, as determined by performance on the SAT-M) and the effects of participation in special programs on these talents. With respect to this body of research, the effects of acceleration are particularly relevant to this study. Brody and Benbow (1987) sought to determine the effects of different types of acceleration programs on academic achievements, participation in extracurricular activities, goals and aspirations, or social/emotional development. They compared groups of students who accelerated their learning by skipping a grade (Group 1), who took AP or advanced classes for credit (Group 2), who took classes with advanced subject matter (Group 3), and who had no acceleration (Group 4). They reported no harmful effects of acceleration and no differences between groups in social and emotional adjustment. Thus, according to their rating scales, there was no evidence that acceleration produced negative results in the social and emotional area. They reported that Groups 1 and 2 had higher educational goals, and a greater number of students in Groups 1 and 2 planned to earn a Ph.D. These findings are relevant to the questions posed in the current study; however, an open-ended interview format was not used, thus, some of the rich detail sought in the present qualitative study was not available. The researchers said that they “did not always have information on the nature of their experiences” (p. 106). The current study focuses on students’ perceptions of the nature of their experience in gifted programs.

Research Related to Specific Program Models

Another line of research that is relevant to the current study taps into students’ experiences in gifted programs. Most of these studies are specific to particular program models. For example, Moon, Feldhusen, and Dillon (1994) found that the Purdue Three-Stage Model had a positive impact on most participants. Researchers concluded that participating students had improved their thinking and problem-solving skills. Moon (1995) also investigated the effects of participation in the Purdue Three-Stage Model gifted program on the families of participants. Specifically, she examined whether participation in the enrichment program created changes in the family systems and how these changes occurred (e.g., home-school relationships, encouragement of talent, family structure). She concluded, “the intensive, multiple-case methodology used for this investigation also highlighted the fact that a single enrichment program can be perceived quite differently by different children and their families” (p. 207).

There has been a vast amount of research, including some longitudinal research, on the outcomes of the Schoolwide Enrichment Triad Model, created by Joseph Renzulli and his colleagues. In their summary of that research, Renzulli and Reis (1994) reported that the model “may improve aspects of high-ability students’ school experience, including classroom climate, instructional processes, students’ self-concept, attitudes toward learning, and postsecondary plans” (p. 18).

Davalos and Haensly (1997) investigated the perceived value of a yearlong independent study/mentorship course offered to gifted high school students. Ninety students responded to a nine-item questionnaire rating aspects of their experiences in a mentorship program. In addition, students had opportunities to write comments under each item. The researchers reported that 23.5% “believed the program had made a significant contribution to their life” (p. 205). Researchers also reported that 47.5% reported an improvement in students’ self-esteem. Students also mentioned the personal significance of a mentor, growth in work-study skills, and an academic advantage in college preparation as a result of their participation in the mentorship program. The researchers concluded that gifted programs had long-lasting effects and were an economically beneficial option for gifted youth.

Research on Students’ Perceptions of Giftedness

Several authors and researchers have written about students’ views on being gifted. Ashman (2000) inter-
giftedness. Children who felt different, both boys and girls, had lower self-esteem scores than their gifted peers who felt normal. Though this study looked at the feelings of gifted children, it did not focus on how they felt about gifted programs specifically. The long-term benefits of being labeled gifted or participating in gifted programs were also not addressed.

Several researchers have studied how applying the labeled to a child within a family affected other family members. Grenier (1985), using pairs of school-aged siblings, sought to determine if the label of giftedness caused siblings to view their relationships differently. She assessed the following aspects of relationships: competition, cooperation, parental treatment, self-image, communication, friction, and general positive relationship. Findings from this study showed that the most positive relationships occurred when one sibling was at least 3 years older than the other. Also, contrary to previous research that reported greater friction in relationships when the gifted child was the younger sibling, this study found no difference in the amount of friction whether the gifted child was the older or younger sibling.

In another study on this same issue, Colangelo and Brower (1987) found that family members had positive feelings about the gifted member’s label 5 or more years after participation in the gifted program. However, gifted siblings felt uneasy about the effects of the label on the family and did not perceive their siblings as being positive about it either.

Research Related to Future Endeavors

Reis, Callahan, and Goldsmith (1994) looked at how gifted boys and girls from grades 6, 7, and 8 envisioned the future. While it is interesting that many of the girls were interested in medical and science careers, long-term research is needed to determine if gifted programs helped them to achieve such goals.

Gifted and talented women who enrolled in a career development program were surveyed 14 years later to determine if the career goals they identified in the program had been realized (Hollinger & Fleming, 1992). Hollinger and Fleming noted reason for concern as many of their subjects had not yet reached their educational or career goals. Similar research on gifted men would help determine if gifted and talented women are not being served adequately. The current study seeks to determine, in part, how gifted program experiences affect both men and women’s expectations for the future.

The focus of this study fills a gap in the current literature by examining through narrative how participation in
gifted programs has affected the lives of college students. The qualitative nature of the study describes “experience” as told from the students’ perspectives and provides windows into viewing intangible, unintended, or immeasurable outcomes of gifted education services.

**Methodology**

Fifty college students attending a large Midwestern university responded to an open-ended interview that elicited responses about their previous experiences in gifted programs, the types of instructional differences they noted between gifted and general education classes, how their social and emotional needs were addressed, and their perspectives about the impact that gifted programs had on their lives. All interviews were recorded and transcribed. They were analyzed qualitatively with coding schemes related to questions and themes as they emerged from the responses.

**Participants**

College students were targeted because they had recent memories of elementary and secondary schooling and were in the stage of their lives where they were considering options for their future. The participants were recruited by disseminating a survey that solicited volunteers for the interviews. A graduate research assistant distributed surveys to large classes (with more than 60 students) taken mostly by upper level students in the College of Education and the College of Engineering. These two colleges represented students with potentially different strengths and talents. In total, over 1,000 surveys were distributed in these classes by giving them to the professor and having the professor distribute them either at the beginning or end of class. On a voluntary basis, students returned the survey if they were interested in being interviewed and if they had participated in a gifted program for at least 3 years during elementary, middle, or secondary school. Students who participated were reimbursed $10 for their time and cooperation. Only 50 students could be reimbursed with the mini-research grant that funded this study.

One hundred and four students returned their survey indicating that they would like to be interviewed. Thirteen students returned surveys and either declined to be interviewed or had not participated in gifted education. A total of 50 undergraduates were interviewed, selected randomly out of the surveys that were returned with one exception. The students representing diversity (i.e., not Caucasian) were targeted for interviews and, thus, were not selected randomly. When students did not return phone calls or electronic messages to set up interviews, the graduate research assistant selected another interview candidate from the surveys returned.

The survey information requested demographic data such as age, ethnicity, the type of program in which the student had participated, the size and location of the school in which they had participated in the gifted program (elementary, middle, or high school), the duration of participation in the gifted program, and family information if possible (e.g., parent’s income). Also, the students were asked to rate their experiences in the gifted program from 1 (poor) to 10 (excellent).

The participants represented a sample of students from many different types of gifted programs and schools. Therefore, the students’ areas of strengths may have been academic or creative. The range of programs they participated in included academically accelerated programs, enrichment programs, and ones designed to foster talent in the fine and applied arts. Some students reported that they have gone to small Christian schools or rural schools with a very small population. Others had gone to large, public, suburban high schools; private schools; or magnet schools for the gifted. One participant had attended a residential high school for math and science. Some students reported that they had been in gifted programs all their lives; others reported that they had participated in gifted education only in high school. Participants represented a broad spectrum of experiences in gifted education. See Table 1 for the demographics of participants. For both groups, those who were and those who were not interviewed, demographics were relatively similar, with the mean rating for how they would rank their experiences in the gifted program being slightly higher for the students who were not interviewed.

**Interview Questions**

Participants were questioned about their experiences and their perceptions of those experiences that led them to reflect upon the benefits or costs of participating in gifted programs. The framework for designing the interview questions was taken from the categories listed in *Recommended Practices in Gifted Education* (Shore, Cornell, Robinson, & Ward, 1991). These practices were categorized: advocacy and administration, identification and assessment, curricular program and policies, advice to educators, advice to parents, advice to professionals, social
Table 1

Demographic Comparison of Participants Interviewed and Not Interviewed

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Interviewed (50)</th>
<th>Not Interviewed (54)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>17</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1 (2%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18</td>
<td>8 (16%)</td>
<td>5 (9%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19</td>
<td>21 (43%)</td>
<td>13 (24%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20</td>
<td>8 (16%)</td>
<td>15 (28%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21</td>
<td>13 (26%)</td>
<td>15 (28%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>22</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>3 (6%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Interviewed</th>
<th>Not Interviewed</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ethnicity</th>
<th>Interviewed</th>
<th>Not Interviewed</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Asian</td>
<td>2 (4%)</td>
<td>4 (7%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic</td>
<td>2 (4%)</td>
<td>3 (5%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>42 (87%)</td>
<td>45 (83%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Multi</td>
<td>1 (1%)</td>
<td>1 (2%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>1 (1%)</td>
<td>1 (2%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Years in School</th>
<th>Interviewed</th>
<th>Not Interviewed</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Freshman</td>
<td>8 (16%)</td>
<td>4 (7%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sophomore</td>
<td>16 (32%)</td>
<td>13 (24%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Junior</td>
<td>12 (24%)</td>
<td>12 (22%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Senior</td>
<td>14 (28%)</td>
<td>22 (41%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| Average Rating of Experience (10 is highest) | 8.04 | 8.37 |

Note. Not all students answered every question.

and emotional adjustment, and special groups of gifted children. For example, the recommended practice under the category of social and emotional adjustment deals with the issue of the negative effects of labeling. The authors stated, “Although the literature is too undeveloped to strongly support or refute the avoidance of labeling children as gifted, there is little support for the assertion of harm to the labeled child, resulting from either isolation or hostility” (p. 235). Students have rarely been questioned retrospectively about the effects on their lives of such labeling. The interview protocol consisted of open-ended questions pertaining to items in the above categories with several questions related to experiences, selection, instruction, social and emotional needs, and impact. Each interview lasted approximately 1 hour (see the Appendix for the interview protocol).

Analysis

All interviews were recorded, transcribed, and coded for emergent themes. Coding categories suggested by Bogdan and Biklen (1992) included context codes, situation codes, perspectives held by participants, participants’ ways of thinking about people and objects, process codes, and others that emerged from the narratives of the students. Coding schemes included areas such as social and emotional perspectives, academic preparation, impact on present activities, impact on future activities, and perceived benefits or costs. Working with a graduate assistant, meeting regularly, and having dialogue about the coding schemes strengthened the trustworthiness of the study. Both the graduate assistant and the primary author coded text independently and then came to consensus on themes that emerged from the data. No quantitative analysis on the reliability of coding schemes was made.

It is important to note that the interview questions prompted responses that were descriptive in nature. No attempt was made to analyze them quantitatively because they were not posed such that they could be answered in any particular way. Therefore, conclusions were drawn from salient themes of the narratives. In addition to the interview data, there was one open-ended question on the survey: “What would you want people to know about your experience in gifted programs?” The responses from all data sources (including the mean rating of their experiences) were triangulated to verify consistency of responses and the interpretation of the data that students had overwhelmingly positive experiences in gifted programs.

Limitations

It would be inappropriate and difficult to generalize these results across settings or contexts because they relate quite specifically to the 50 students interviewed. These students were not from a diverse group of college students, but instead were from a highly rated academic state university where admission criteria require high academic performance. The students were predominately Caucasian, female, and from middle- to high-income families (24 of 50 students reported that their parents earned in the range of $55,000–100,000 annually). The demographics reflect the composition of most gifted programs in school districts in the regional area where the study took place.
The students reported the types of programs in which they participated. No attempt was made to verify their descriptions with actual programs. The focus of this study was their perspectives of the impact of their overall gifted education experiences and not descriptions of their programs. This may be a limitation because students’ comments certainly may reflect the quality, type of program, and amount of time they spent in their program. Separating and analyzing students’ responses by how they described their programs may yield additional interesting findings.

Results

The rationale used to construct the interview questions yielded responses that included comments about many well-known issues in gifted education. These issues included the variability of gifted programs, grouping practices and the effects of labeling, differentiation of instruction, and student outcomes (benefits and costs). These issues will be addressed more thoroughly in the following pages, along with several other salient themes that emerged from the data. Although it would not be meaningful to quantify the nature of the students’ feelings given the small number of participants, it is an important finding that, although students’ responses were overwhelmingly positive, there was variation among the group interviewed.

Variety of School Programs

Students described their experiences participating in a wide variety of gifted programs. Under the auspices of gifted education, programs ranged from high-level reading groups in first grade, to once-a-week pull-out programs for thinking games in elementary school, to honors or Advanced Placement (AP) classes in middle and high school. The variety of the types of gifted programs in which the students participated illustrated the numerous ways in which school districts implement gifted education programs. This variability contributes to the difficulty in ascertaining the value, impact, or quality of gifted education as a whole. It was not unusual for participants who moved schools to have been in the gifted program in one school district, but not in the other, or to have been in very different types of programs across schools (e.g., in a separate gifted class in one school and a pull-out program in another). One student summed up this variability: “Well, there’s been many, like, during my lifetime.” However, though there were these vast differences in the types of gifted programs, students described the impact similarly.

Many of these college students could not be specific about their elementary experiences in gifted programs, which may simply reflect faulty memories. The following comment was typical of their responses:

And basically it was just, I think, it was we would go to a special room or whatever and I don’t know if, like, the other people had, like, recess. I really don’t remember exactly what the rest of the class was doing, but we would just go and we were supposed to do activities that were just kind of different from what we did in class. And I just don’t really remember doing anything, like, particularly interesting. I think it was more just kind of like different ways to use logic. And you know we’d do kind of like scientific experiment kind of things.

Another student described her elementary experience this way:

And so there were about 10 of us and we’d go to this one woman’s room and she had kind of a neat room and we had snacks and we played fun games. A lot of times, they were like games with vocabulary. Once a week, we would play like a stumpy your classmates kind of game, and so we’d bring in a word that we found in the dictionary that we didn’t think anybody else would know. I don’t remember a whole lot about anything else we did.

Other students described their elementary experiences in a gifted program as a specific class taught outside the classroom, such as French, problem solving, or art.

Well, specifically I remember in grade school I was part of, like, a special art program. They pulled a couple of us—I mean, there was maybe about five of us—out of class, and for part of the day we got to do special projects and stuff like that. So, that’s what I remember mainly from grade school.

In elementary school . . . I remember, I guess it was just like work on the chalkboard. I don’t remember what we did or, like, sometimes we’d get to choose a paper. There would be like a line on it or something and then you had to make a picture out of it.

Grouping Issues and Effects of Labeling

Most of the students discussed how they became “tracked” into high-level classes in the early grades, starting sometimes in elementary school and moving through their high school years. Many students felt negatively about being separated and segregated so early to take more challenging coursework. Grouping issues were salient (mentioned by the majority of those interviewed) and discussed at great length by the students, particularly as they affected their social relationships. Grouping mattered to participants! For many reasons, most students expressed a frustration of belonging to a “gifted group,” particularly as they left elementary school.

Most of the students never knew how they were admitted and had not discussed entrance to the gifted programs with their parents. However, they spoke eloquently and honestly about the stigma attached to being in the
gifted program. There was an overwhelming sense of being different or segregated from other students. One student summarized what many expressed: “You get stereotyped by all of your peers. And then, of course, like, my senior year, I was really pissed off about that.” Another student said, “Well then there’s this same kind of like stigmatism that you got going along with it. It’s kind of like, you know, you’re different in a way. It automatically gives people assumptions about you.” And another student spoke in detail: “They didn’t want to talk to us because we thought we were better. We didn’t actually think we were better, but that’s how they perceived us, and so it was kind of, you know, there was tension a lot of times in classrooms.”

This feeling was especially salient for students who had been put into separate classes within a school, but had some general education classes for gym and lunch. They talked about being ostracized as “the nerd” and being “picked on.” One student commented, “You know, if you’re separated out part of the time, I think it’s better to be separated out the whole time. I don’t know how you’d do honors gym though.”

Many students reflected that the grouping started out at a very young age, sometimes dependent upon a teacher’s recommendation or one test score, which was the sole criterion to get into or be excluded from a program. They were distressed about the inflexibility of the grouping arrangement. One student commented, “They just created divisions, like, in high school—if you don’t start off in honors classes, it’s harder to get into honors classes and it’s harder to get into AP classes. And so it’s like it just continues, like, if you can’t get into one thing, you can’t get into another. So that’s my major thing.”

Another student said, “I just wish they had offered it to everybody, like everybody had the same opportunity. I think again with the whole separation thing, I didn’t like that very much.”

Several respondents were sensitive to cultural diversity and felt that it was important to be with a diverse group of people. They wanted more diversity in their own education.

I definitely had inspiring teachers. And being around students who were more focused on a specific field—that was great. But, at the same time, I kind of, I’m reflecting more upon my experience in high school that, at the same time, I went to a really large public high school that was very diverse, and I feel like I missed out on part of that. Like I feel like doing the honors program kind of ended up creating a very segregated school. And so, I mean it wasn’t extremely segregated, but it made my classes largely White and Asian, and it made the rest of the school a very different mix. And I appreciated the fact that I went to a diverse high school, and I would have appreciated seeing more of it in my classes. So, I kind of have mixed opinions, plus I guess my feelings in grade school that, like, when I took the reading class, I really felt segregated from the rest.

One student said that segregation in her high school was a “huge issue.” She said there were all White students in honors classes and minorities in the regular classes. Another student said, “There’s a lot of importance on my cultural awareness and cultural understanding, and so that’s something that I would, I think everyone benefits from meeting and being friends with people from different backgrounds.” Another student echoed that feeling:

You know, it would be nice to have a more diverse group so you could meet a whole bunch of different kinds of students and get to hear their ideas. That’s one thing I love about college is the fact that I get to hear so many different views that I never thought about before.

One student philosophized, “There’s really no answer to the segregation in the tracking system. But, if I could do something different to make the tracking system more diverse, that’s what I’d try to do.” Finally, a student summed up the tracking issue: “And then, once you were in those programs, it seemed like you had more opportunities to do things.”

Differences Perceived Between Gifted and General Education Classes

The respondents said they developed most of their friendships with students who were in class with them. Consequently, most of their friends were from the gifted program. There were occasional comments from the students indicating that they wished that some of their other friends had also been in the gifted program. These kinds of responses came out of discussions about the differences between gifted education classes and general education classes. Some respondents felt that their friends who were not in the gifted program could also have benefited from the gifted classes.

Overwhelmingly, the biggest differences noted between the general education classes and the gifted classes were the behavior of the students and the enthusiasm and characteristics of the teacher. In nearly every interview, the students said that teachers who taught the gifted classes were better teachers and more enthusiastic about teaching compared to the “nongifted” classes. The students commented that teachers of the gifted classes treated them with more respect. They also perceived that their gifted teachers were teaching because they enjoyed students who “wanted to learn.” Students noted that, in most cases, the expectations were higher in gifted classes. They were expected to do their homework, and the students in high-level classes were not disruptive.

If the same teachers taught gifted and nongifted classes, students noticed differences in the quality of their
teaching and their teaching styles between the two settings. One student captured the difference in this way:

The regular classes were very disruptive, and I had to go into different rooms and make announcements, and so it’s like you walk into a class, but you know it’s regular looking at it and it’s so sad that the same teachers you know, but it’s just that nobody would be listening or people would be arguing like it was never a teacher sitting there speaking and everyone sitting there listening.

Students commented further about the teachers. One student said, "They really want to teach people that really want to learn. Whereas in the other classes, it’s like, no." Another student said, "Regular classes it seemed like there were a lot more people who goofed off and didn’t really seem to care. I don’t know if it was because the material wasn’t challenging enough.”

Students reported that there was a better feeling and a more relaxed atmosphere in the honors and AP classes. When probed about instructional differences, students mentioned that, in the gifted classes, there was much more discussion, hands-on activities, problem solving, and working in groups. Students said their gifted classes were more “thought-provoking.” They also described the teachers as expecting “more out of you.” Frequently, they described the teachers as letting students go at their own pace and work independently.

When asked about their most memorable experiences, the students commented on specific projects such as competitions, science experiments, a research study, or the making of a particular book in their own interest area. They also wished that their “regular classes” would have included some of those same projects and experiences.

Student Outcomes (Benefits and Costs)

Benefits seemed to outweigh the costs for these students in gifted programs. Quantitatively, their average rating of their experiences in gifted programs was 8.04 on a scale of 1 (poor) to 10 (excellent). Survey respondents who were not interviewed had an average overall ranking of 8.37, again reaffirming the overwhelming positive response to experiences in gifted programs. On the whole, the students expressed that a major benefit of participating in a gifted program was that it better prepared them for college, helped them learn how to study, gave them the skills to be better students, and prepared them for career paths as lifelong learners.

Many students commented that their gifted program experiences gave them more interesting activities and elicited better study skills, which ultimately helped them in college. Many students said the gifted program gave them a work ethic by teaching them to work hard to accomplish their goals. Students spoke about time management and how being in the gifted program helped them to organize and manage their time better. They also said it helped them accomplish more difficult tasks and that success helped to build self-esteem.

Some students felt that their self-esteem was high just because they were selected to be in a gifted program. For example: “But, I mean I think it’s definitely higher because I feel more intelligent sometimes than other people. So, it’s like a comparison thing.” Another student said, “Yes, I’d say that my friends think I’m smart, too. And my family thinks I’m smart, and so, as I said, I think I’m smart.”

Others attributed their high self-esteem to having to work hard and overcome challenges such as mastering difficult material. One student described her challenging advanced math class:

Oh, yeah, because in math I didn’t think I was good at it, but I found out that, if I worked hard enough and put forth the effort, I could do it, and that made me gain self-esteem because it kind of made me think if I can do this in that area, I can do this in about any aspect of my life. If I put my mind to it, I can do it.

Another example of a student who attributed her self-esteem to a challenging experience expressed it this way:

I think it’s allowed me to, like, challenge myself a little bit more because, if I wasn’t involved in the gifted program, I think I would not realize my full potential, that you can, even if you had trouble with a subject before, it doesn’t mean you can’t ever learn it. And not to put on that I hate the subject because I did poorly in it. You know, you can still go back and, like, try to learn it again.

On the whole, students felt positive about their experiences: “I think the program has . . . really made me enjoy my education and made me feel good about it.” And “I think it prepared me for harder things and taught me how to handle my time and be responsible with things.” Most of the college students interviewed were happy to have participated in gifted programs because the programs better prepared them for their future. Overwhelmingly, the advice of these students for educators was to let more students experience gifted education.

Discussion: “A Better Education”

Researchers, educators, politicians, and parents take note: The students interviewed said that gifted education had an overwhelmingly positive impact on their lives. In fact, many students thought that gifted education gave them “a better education” compared to their peers who were not in gifted education classes. Gifted education, regardless of the specific type of program, gave these stu-
I M P A C T O F G I F T E D P R O G R A M S

dents life-altering opportunities that cannot be quantified: opportunities to work hard, to compete with their peers, to participate in programs that went beyond their schools, and to meet other students who had similar interests. In their words, these opportunities gave them “a work ethic,” an understanding of the meaning of overcoming challenges, enhanced self-esteem, and an introduction to areas they are currently pursuing in college. A key finding was that gifted programs better prepared these students for college by helping them to acquire time-management and study skills, helping them to value hard work, encouraging their interest in career possibilities, and boosting their self-esteem. These benefits can be summarized by the following student’s words:

And yet, it is a very positive experience because it really taught me the work ethic and how to face challenges and how to really go after something that maybe isn’t your cup of tea, but really go for it any way.

At the 2000 American Educational Research Association convention, Mary Frasier posed the concern that the goal of gifted education is not to give students a “better” education, but to give them a more appropriate one (personal communication, April, 2000). The message to educators should be clear: The learning environment, the teachers, and the instruction in gifted programs are more engaging, challenging, and motivating for students than what they found in general education classrooms. The instructional differences noted by students between general education courses and gifted courses are well documented in the literature related to tracking (Oaks, Gamoran, & Page, 1992). The students interviewed for this study confirmed these findings. They spoke about differences such as activities that engaged them in higher level thinking, less emphasis on discipline, more content, and an overall better classroom atmosphere, all of which contributed to a better relationship between the teacher and the students.

Whether or not educators in the field of gifted education intended to give a specific group of students a better education or not, they perhaps have. Rather than attributing the differences in the effectiveness of gifted versus nongifted classrooms to students’ abilities alone, this research study suggests that there were other contributing factors such as better resources, better instruction, and more enthusiastic teachers in gifted education. The students vividly described the learning environment in their gifted programs: It consisted of caring teachers, motivated students, and challenging instruction. A variety of types of instructional activities, including group work, choices, and authentic hands-on learning experiences, were used.

In one student’s words, the differences between general and gifted education classes were clear: “While everyone else was doing the normal stuff, we were growing beans.”

Students not only reported that districts tended to have the “best” teachers teaching the high-level or gifted classes, but they also noted that, even when the same teachers taught both the high- and low-level classes, they were better and more engaged with the higher level students. They noticed that other students were not motivated in their general education classrooms and that this contributed to the teachers not teaching as well as they did in the gifted classrooms. The relationship between instruction and student motivation is dynamic, and teachers need to see their instructional strategies and styles, as well as content, as critical variables affecting student achievement and motivation.

The students described the benefits of gifted education for their future goals, particularly entrance into a college of their choice. They were happy to have had challenging academic experiences in the gifted programs. But, they also painted pictures of harassment that accompanied the gifted label, of feeling different and separated from their peers because of pull-out programs or segregated classes.

Many students felt negatively about the gifted label. They felt that it placed unrealistic expectations on them, and they felt pressure from one or both of their parents to match those expectations. This is consistent with what Ring and Shaughnessy (1993) reported in their article discussing the effects of the gifted label: “Expectations from parents and teachers were, however, seen as problematic” (p. 34). And Colangelo (1997) stated, “School counselors should anticipate difficulties in families when a child is first labeled gifted” (p. 358). Colangelo said families with children labeled as gifted eventually adjust to the label, but other researchers have found that the nonlabeled children in the family are more prone to personality adjustment problems.

Dweck (2000) has argued that the gifted label is harmful for students when it is associated with an entity theory of intelligence:

The term “gifted” conjures up an entity theory. It implies that some entity, a large amount of intelligence, has been magically bestowed upon students, making them special. Thus, when students are so labeled, some may be over concerned with justifying that label and less concerned with seeking challenges that enhance their skills. . . . They may also begin to react more poorly to setbacks, worrying that mistakes, confusions, or failures mean that they don’t deserve the coveted label. If being gifted makes them special, then losing the label may mean to them that they are “ordinary” and somehow less worthy. (p. 122)

Students acknowledged that expectations came with their label and worried about disappointing their parents.
Perhaps there are circular consequences of the gifted label—the negative effects and the necessity of measures to correct them.

It was surprising that students did not have more vivid memories of their elementary experiences in gifted programs. It seems that there have been extensive efforts in the field to create quality gifted education programs at the elementary level. However, from the students’ perspective, the greatest impact came later through participation in secondary programs that included honors, AP courses, and extracurricular competitions. Of course, this may be a function of time and the fact that they may have better remembered their more recent experiences. However, their articulation of the importance of their secondary experiences to their future must be acknowledged. Educators should pay particular attention to making those secondary experiences challenging and available to as many students as possible.

Students felt a sense of injustice that they had access to better educational opportunities than other students. They advised that these activities should be made available to many more students. The insights gained from these students pose challenges to educators and policy makers to reform gifted and general education. It gives educators an opportunity to focus on positive aspects of gifted programs and work on changing the negative ones such as stigmatizing and labeling students.

Conclusion

Perhaps it is not our intention to provide a subset of learners a better education. But, the opportunity to take what we do (defined as gifted education) and to contribute to a better education for all children should not be lost in terminology, tradition, discourse, or politics. One student commented, “My education was enriched by these programs. They provided challenges and stimulation. Many of the mentors in these programs have been inspirational and mentors for life, as well as the classroom.” How can more students reap the positive outcomes of gifted education?

The research findings provide windows into the hearts and minds of students who must deal with the daily stigma of being involved in a program that sets them apart from their peers. These findings inform educators about the concerns of the students who have participated in gifted education. This research opens the possibilities for a conceptualization of gifted education devoid of the negative aspects that have plagued it since the 1970s. The key focus of this vision would be on sharing the pedagogy that creates challenging learning experiences and provides access to opportunities that open future doors for students—all students. This focus is not unlike the vision of self-actualization for gifted students discussed by Grant and Piekowski (1999) and Dai and Renzulli (2000). Enabling, advocating, and nurturing students to achieve their potential are goals for all students. Someone’s potential cannot be predetermined. As Dweck (2000) stated, “I have tried to argue that we do not know what anyone’s future potential is from [his or her] current behavior. We never know exactly what someone is capable of with the right support from the environment and with the right degree of personal motivation or commitment” (p. 154).

Future Research

This pilot study of 50 students evokes many ideas for future research. Case studies of students who did and did not get challenged in school might add to the growing body of literature that examines how to support students to reach their potential. In her keynote address at the 48th annual convention of the National Association for Gifted Children, Sally Reis (2001) urged educators to pursue follow-up studies to examine how gifted programs have impacted the lives of individuals who have participated in them. One reviewer suggested that researchers “tease out” differences related to experiencing different kinds of programming models. This would be an excellent extension of this research.

It is also important to address through research what happens when teaching techniques of educators of the gifted are infused into general education classrooms. Some research of this type has already been done (Landrum, 2001; Renzulli, 1998; Tomlinson, 1996), but there is a need for more.

References


Reis, S. (2001, November). Why gifted programs make a difference in children’s lives and how to ensure that these programs continue. Keynote address at the annual meeting of the National Association for Gifted Children, Cincinnati, OH.


Author Note

I would like to thank Bill Sallas and Katie Totel, two graduate assistants who contributed to the literature review and the data collection and analysis for this study. Their work was supported by funds received from the Bureau of Educational Research in the College of Education at the University of Illinois. I would also like to thank the anonymous reviewers who gave thoughtful and constructive suggestions for improving earlier versions of this manuscript.

Appendix

Impact Interview Protocol

A. Experiences

1. Describe the gifted program in your school district.
2. Describe your experiences in the gifted program.
3. Describe experiences that were especially challenging to you.
4. Describe experiences that you particularly liked in the gifted program.
5. Describe experiences that you did not like about being in the gifted program.
6. (If pull-out) How did your experiences in the gifted program relate to your other school experiences?
7. Describe the experiences that you had in the program that stood out (positive or negative).
8. How might your experiences in gifted programs have been improved, made more meaningful, etc.?
9. What types of things would you like to see done for other students like yourself?

B. Selection

1. What do you remember about being selected for participation in the gifted program?
2. How did you feel about the identification and selection process?
3. How did your selection for participation in a gifted program affect your school life? (current and/or future experiences)
4. From your perspective, who was most likely to be placed in the gifted program?
5. How would you describe the demographic composition of your gifted program?

C. Instruction

1. How would you describe the instruction that you received in the gifted program?
2. How did your instruction in the gifted program differ from your instruction in general education?
3. How would you describe your academic needs?
4. How did the gifted program address your strengths and/or weaknesses?

D. Social/Emotional

1. How did it feel to be selected to participate in a gifted program?
2. How did the gifted program address your social or emotional needs?
3. Describe any experiences you had with school guidance counselors.
4. Describe how your parents discussed with you your involvement in the gifted and talented program.
5. How did your participation in the gifted program affect your family?
6. What advice would you now give to your family regarding your participation in a gifted program?

E. Impact

1. Describe how your past experiences in gifted programs have influenced your present day activities.
2. How would you describe the role that your participation in gifted education played in your life?
3. What can you tell me about your self-esteem? Has it changed as a result of your involvement in gifted programs?
4. What are your current grades like?