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Not what, but who: Controlled choice in gifted education programs in the United States

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Abstract

Gifted education's most pressing problem, according to its critics, is a lack of racial, cultural, and socioeconomic diversity. This lack of diversity can be attributed to the fractured nature of gifted education's historical development, and the also fractured development of its very independent and numerous stakeholders. By the 20th century, these factors caused an overreaching regulatory structure to be practically infeasible. This policy proposal attempts to push back against historical precedent and begin a process of implementing overarching guidelines for gifted education programs in the United States based on a Controlled Choice model of admissions for gifted and talented programs that receive federal funding. The new federal Special Task Force on Equity in Excellence will be tasked with enforcing and overseeing this policy change.

Keywords: Gifted education, education policy, gifted education policy, controlled choice, diversity education, Every Student Succeeds Act, Javits Act

Gifted and talented education is arguably the most controversial realm of education policy, theory, and practice because it appears, on a first glance, to be a simple and generally beneficial field when it is complicated and messy in reality. Controversies can occur when this public perception of gifted education as a universal good conflicts with the harsher realities of implementing such policies, which might be leaving the most deserving students behind.

1. Unpacking “Gifted” and “Talented”

Gifted and talented education is arguably the most controversial realm of education policy, theory, and practice because it appears, on a first glance, to

be a simple and generally beneficial field when it is complicated and messy in reality. Controversies can occur when this public perception of gifted education as a universal good conflicts with the harsher realities of implementing such policies, which might be leaving the most deserving students behind.

On the one hand, designing and implementing programs to support what Johns Hopkins University's Center for Talented Youth calls "... nurturing the bright young people who will go on to make significant contributions to our world" seems like a democratic and patriotic goal (2015). Educating our best and brightest students, as argued by Johnathan Wai in the *National Review*, "... [has] a long-term impact on GDP," suggesting that gifted education is a topic of national importance (2016). With this in mind, it is not hard to imagine that the next Albert Einstein or the child who will eventually grow up to cure cancer may be sitting in a classroom right now, becoming disinterested in the sciences because of policymakers' failure to advocate for their unique educational needs.

On the other hand, huge questions loom over the entire field of gifted education. Critics ask whether the entire system may be reinforcing structures of privilege and oppression in ways that no scholar, teacher, or policymaker would articulate as a part of the original goal of gifted education. For example, Donna Y. Ford, James L. Moore III, and Deborah A. Harmon (2005) argue in their work "Integrating Multicultural and Gifted Education: A Curricular Framework" that the lack of multiculturalism in gifted education hinders learning for many students of color in American public schools. Educational inequities are part of a larger system of inequity that stretches across many sectors, from public health to urban planning and beyond. But failing to address these shortcomings in access to specialized educational programming for students of color is particularly problematic because increasing levels of education, as argued by Ron Haskins (2008), have been shown to boost the mobility of children and directly affects lifetime earnings. Making access to educational programs equitable will produce a more equitable society, in the long-term.

Rather than being simply a facet of a larger nexus of problems plaguing gifted education policy, attempts at addressing the inequity of gifted education as a whole are simultaneously the most pressing and the hardest to rectify. The field is currently scattered across an array of different polycsapes at the local, state, and federal levels, and managed by different entities in different geographic areas, and is exceptionally difficult to regulate standards of practice and even harder to ensure admissions policies

are diverse and inclusive of traditionally marginalized populations. If Johns Hopkins and the National Association for Gifted Children (NAGC) cannot agree on a common definition of what a gifted student is, how can they agree on what an inclusive gifted education policy agenda looks like?

This paper attempts to answer that question by presenting guidelines for inclusive policies for all institutions working with any students classified as “gifted” or “talented” in the United States. The policy recommendation set forth in this paper is simple: any program that works with gifted and talented youth that receives federal funding should update their admissions policies to reflect a controlled choice model, as exemplified by Cambridge Public Schools.

2. The History of Gifted Education Policy in the United States

Gifted education policy in the United States began alongside the invention of intelligence testing and the founding of the discipline of psychology in the early 20th century. However, as time progressed, gifted education as a field became more interested in student advocacy work, spearheaded by NGOs and followed by the federal government when it became politically advantageous for such advocacy to take place. The current gifted education polycscape has become fragmented in the wake of recent neoliberal education reform efforts and is primarily driven by special policy reports, scarce provisions for gifted and talented programs embedded into reauthorizations of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, and the creation or continued action of non-governmental organizations. This fragmentation is particularly important when discussing multicultural gifted education, because it obfuscates the very stark realities of inequity in gifted education. In other words, having many different players in the gifted education policy arena makes it more difficult for any one group to gain a clear sense of the problems affecting the system as a whole.

In December 1908, psychologist Robert Goddard published *The Binet and Simon Tests of Intellectual Capacity*, a scale of intelligence based on the findings of French psychologist Alfred Binet. Goddard began using it as a benchmark assessment for the students of both the New Jersey Training School for Feeble-Minded Girls and Boys and local public school children in Vineland, N.J (Ludy, 2009). The Binet test quickly became popular, and by 1914 Goddard was the first psychologist to include results from it in a court of law.

However, the foundations for the academic field of gifted education did not arise until Lewis Terman revised and updated the Binet test with his colleagues at the Stanford Graduate School of Education (Leslie, 2000). The Stanford-Binet, as the newly revised test was called, measured cognitive ability and academic potential and presented the concept of intelligence as a single number, called an “Intelligence Quotient”, or IQ. By 1916, Terman’s new test was being administered to public schoolchildren across California. Those that scored unusually highly were invited to participate in a longitudinal study of gifted and talented children at Stanford. While inconclusive and marred with design flaws, Terman’s study is still in progress today with the few surviving subjects.

By 1954, the field of gifted education shifted away from studies of general intelligence and crystallized into more of a student advocacy apparatus with the founding of the National Association of Gifted Education (NAGC) by Ann Isaacs (2015). According to their website, the organization is devoted to pushing policy agendas that cater to gifted and talented youth from across the racial and socioeconomic spectra (2015).

The federal government lagged behind non-governmental organizations in the support and advocacy for programs for gifted and talented students and did not begin to allocate substantial resources until after the Soviet Union launched the Sputnik satellite in 1957. After Sputnik, which scared many policy stakeholders into believing that U.S. was beginning to fall behind in math, foreign language, and science education, the U.S. government began to support programs for advanced learning in STEM fields, but it continued to neglect the needs of exceptional students in the humanities. These math- and science-centric initiatives were codified into the language of the National Defense Act of 1958.

The Office of the Gifted and Talented within the federal Department of Education was given formal status in 1974, and after that point gifted education policy at the federal level can be categorized into three distinct realms: the publication of special reports such as *National Excellence: The Case for Developing America’s Talent* (1993) which detail the state of federal gifted education policy, provisions for gifted and talented programs embedded into reauthorizations of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, and the creation of separate non-governmental institutions like the National Research Center on the Gifted and Talented (1990) and The Johns Hopkins University’s Center for Talented Youth (1979).

The history of gifted education policy in the United States sheds light on

how the policescape arrived at its current state. Different organizations and groups each have their own goals for gifted education and their own metrics to define giftedness because they have worked independently from one another for such a long time in history. JHU's Center for Talented Youth does not interact with state-level policies on gifted education in schools extensively, and the National Association for Gifted Children (2016) is primarily interested in supporting and development, staff development, advocacy, communication, and collaboration with other organizations. Therefore, the very nature of gifted education policy makes it very hard to regulate, but recommending policies that affect the admissions practices of all gifted education programs is a manageable first step in the road to meaningful reform.

3. Pre-Existing Policies

Currently, the federal Department of Education articulates almost no direct policy initiatives for the education of gifted and talented students, preferring to leave the decisions up to the states. The Jacob Javits Gifted and Talented Students Education Act, originally passed as a part of the 1988 reauthorization of ESEA and expanded to include competitive grants for states to complete gifted education policy initiatives in 2002, offers almost nothing in terms of actual recommendations for action other than a definition of giftedness. As of the 2002 iteration, giftedness is defined by the federal government as “students, children, or youth who give evidence of high achievement capability in areas such as intellectual, creative, artistic, or leadership capacity, or in specific academic fields, and who need services and activities not ordinarily provided by the school in order to fully develop those capabilities” (2015).

This vague definition provided by the federal Department of Education fails to include any concrete metrics to assess giftedness. This failure has helped to preserve the most pressing policy question in the field of gifted education: the lack of consensus on what giftedness really is, and different stakeholders define the term in various ways. One of the metrics provided by the Center for Talented Youth at Hopkins is “. . . Achievement at the 95th percentile or higher on one or more subtests of a nationally normed standardized test,” while the state of Oklahoma considers “. . . identified students who score in the top three percent (3%) on any national standardized test of intellectual ability” as gifted (as quoted in National Association for Gifted Children, 2015).

Concrete policy initiatives on gifted education in general are clearly limited, but initiatives on diversity and inclusion within gifted education are even sparser. The lack of specific initiatives related to racial diversity is exemplified by the current admissions policies of the Johns Hopkins University Center for Talented Youth (CTY). CTY (2016) states on its website that “. . . Applicants to and employees of [CTY]. . . are protected under Federal law from discrimination on the [basis of] race,” but the application process for the CTY Talent Search (the method by which CTY selects students to label as “. . . talented”) or its student programming does not mention this language. Rather, the only mentions of diversity and inclusion are in relation to student with disabilities or in relation to a more general diversity, which CTY believes “. . . is part of the educational experience the program provides, and [they] encourage students to embrace the opportunity to learn from others who are different from them.” While CTY contains several smaller scholarship funds to promote access to its programming for students from under-represented groups, like their Goldman Sachs Scholars Program, by no means are their inclusion policies comprehensive, and much more work remains to be done. CTY’s programming exemplifies the gifted education policyscape’s general stance toward these types of policies: while a handful of targeted initiatives exist, the presence of comprehensive structures to promote racial equity remains lacking.

4. Current Stakeholders in Gifted Policy

As previously stated, the stakeholders acting in the gifted education policy landscape are diverse and each occupy a distinct niche that adds to the policymaking nexus. This variance causes problems when attempting to implement a policy agenda across all groups because each operates on a different policy level with a different scope and different goals for the gifted students they serve. However, it will become clear through an outline of the different stakeholders that the federal government is the best route to an effectively implemented policy proposal.

Nonprofit organizations like the NAGC, the Center for Talented Youth, and the National Research Center on the Gifted and Talented make up the first group of stakeholders. These organizations conduct research and/or advocate for the advancement of policies specifically for gifted and talented students in the policyscape. Their work most directly informs legislators and lawmakers at the state, local, and federal level, and they may or may not

directly interact with gifted and talented students. With this lack of direct involvement in mind, attempting to change their perceptions of multiculturalism in gifted education will be especially challenging.

The second group of stakeholders is only a single constituent: the federal Department of Education (2004), which has taken a fairly hands-off approach to gifted education policy in its enactment of Subpart 6 of Part D of Title V of the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), informally known as the Jacob K. Javits Gifted and Talented Students Education Act of 2001. According to the US Department of Education's (2015, paragraph 1) website, the Jacob K. Javits Gifted and Talented Students Education Program is designed to allocate grant money to states to support their work with populations typically underrepresented in gifted education, but so far only 11 states have been awarded funding under this program. What the Javits Act fails to do is to provide the states with any guidance as to what sort of gifted and talented programs they should propose grant money for in the first place. Because of this strange and tenuous relationship, the US Department of Education deserves to be categorized in a group of its own. It alone has the power to unify the other stakeholders across the United States with national policy initiatives, despite its historical unwillingness to do so. It is also original in this discussion of stakeholders because it is connected to gifted and talented programs in individual school districts, but only through the mediation of state Departments of Education. Thus, it is noteworthy because it neither fails to interact nor directly interacts with gifted and talented students, making it occupy a unique space in the gifted education policyscape.

Third, state-level Departments of Education can be classified as their own group of stakeholders. They are charged with creating and implementing their own gifted education policies under the provisions of the Javits Act, with no direct guidance from the federal government on policies to implement across the range of policies affecting gifted and talented students, much less multiculturalism in gifted and talented education. According to a report released by the NAGC (2015), 14 states did not provide any funding to local districts for gifted children as of the 2012–13 school year, and as mentioned above, only 11 states received federal grant money under the provisions of the Javits Act. Clearly, not all states are taking the steps to allocate funds specifically for gifted and talented students. This level of policymaking accounts for the greatest amount of inconsistency in the education policy landscape and thus, the most difficult place for change to take place.

Individual school districts can be seen as the fourth stakeholder group.

Their position varies depending on location, size, and demographic makeup of their student bodies. They have the most direct control over gifted education policy, as they exist on the “front lines” of policy implementation. School districts, under the oversight of a state Department of Education, are directly responsible for providing services to gifted and talented students and their families. This means that because they are the only governmental apparatus that directly implement gifted and talented programming (alongside non-governmental organizations), they deserve separate classification.

Respectively, the fifth and sixth stakeholder groups are gifted students and their families, who naturally would want special resources allocated for themselves, and students and families of students not traditionally labeled as gifted, who, according to Gallagher, Coleman, and Nelson (2004), are more likely to believe that better resources and “the best teachers” are allocated to gifted students disproportionately. As private individuals, students and families can choose to participate in the public education system’s gifted and talented programs, where available, or exit the public school system and pursue alternative education strategies like private schooling or home-schooling. Thus, these two related stakeholders in the polycscape will not be subject to the same regulatory practices as the other stakeholders outlined in this paper.

After a careful discussion of the stakeholders involved in this polycscape, it becomes clear that the federal government is the best route to implement a lasting change through a policy proposal. It is the only stakeholder that has access to students in all 50 states while being removed enough to effectively administer and evaluate such a policy. A state-by-state initiative or an attempt to push policy through non-governmental organizations would not make sense for this proposal because it would fail to change the system as a whole, which—as ambitious as it sounds—is the necessary route for lasting change.

Policy Proposal

As argued by the Center for Social Inclusion (2003), race and poverty are inextricably linked in the United States. With this fact in mind, this policy proposal attempts to address the inconsistencies in diversity and inclusion that currently present across the gifted education polycscape via a secondary indicator of inequality: free-and reduced-lunch program participation rates. In order to ameliorate the situation outlined above, the proposed solution

requires public and private organizations that selectively admit students to “gifted” and “talented” programs that receive federal funding to implement “controlled choice” admissions processes. Controlled choice originally began in Cambridge Public Schools in a Boston suburb in 1980 and emphasizes the creation of balanced, equitable schools by matching students from diverse backgrounds (measured by free-and reduced-lunch eligibility) within the district to each school in the district. In order to ensure compliance, organizations would be required to regularly report their admissions statistics in a “Gifted Education Common Data Set”, modeled after the Common Data Set (CDS) initiative in higher education.

Management of Policy

This policy could be managed as a joint project of the Civil Rights Division of the federal Department of Justice and the Office of the Gifted and Talented within the federal Department of Education. A 7-person Special Task Force on Equity in Excellence will be formed from the staff within the two offices, led by a Liaison that would act as the primary interlocutor between the two offices. The Liaison will also act as the executive of the Special Task Force while it is in session.

The task force would be responsible for implementing all aspects of the policy outlined below, and will stand for a minimum of two years before being evaluated for renewal.

Elements of Proposal

Effective as soon as possible, any program public or private that claims to work with “gifted” or “talented” youth that receives any source of federal funding would be required to implement a Controlled Choice-based admissions policy, modeled on the policies created by Cambridge Public Schools (2015). The two main groups tasked with operating and maintaining admissions for gifted and talented programs currently are non-governmental organizations and local school districts (through the oversight of a state DoE). Controlled Choice policies are aware of an applicant’s status as a participant of the student’s current school’s Free & Reduced Lunch program and, in this case, any gifted and talented program receiving federal funding would be tasked with admitting a population of students on Free & Reduced Lunch programs that is representative of the applicant pool to a given program. For example, if 56% of the applicant pool for a gifted and talented program in a given school district participates in the district’s Free & Reduced Lunch

program, the number of students admitted to a potential district-wide gifted and talented program should be reflective of that percentage.

Choosing to report Free & Reduced Lunch participation status when applying to a gifted and talented program will remain optional, as is currently the case in Cambridge Public Schools. As defined on their website:

“When families [apply for such a program], they are asked to voluntarily disclose whether or not they qualify for the Free & Reduced Lunch program. This question establishes the family’s assignment category. If a family discloses that they qualify for this benefit, their child’s application is categorized as “Free/Reduced Lunch.” If they do not qualify, or choose not to share this information, their application is assigned as “Paid Lunch.” By voluntarily disclosing whether or not they qualify for this program, families help our system be more equitable,” (2015.)

These programs must keep record of their number of applicants, and be able to provide information regarding the Free & Reduced Lunch participation rates for both the applicant pool and actual participants in the program for any given fiscal year after this policy would be implemented. These data must be made publicly available on a regular basis, in a format similar to that of the Common Data Set (CDS) initiative used by colleges & universities.

If a given program is not compliant with the terms set forth above, then similarly to how state Departments of Education must meet make “adequate yearly progress” or AYP in the improvement of standardized test scores under the policy initiatives of No Child Left Behind, the program must make AYP towards accurate Free & Reduced Lunch participation status reflection in the admitted student population. This would not affect gifted and talented programs that already admit a reflective percentage of students on Free- and Reduced-lunch from the applicant pool. Rather, gifted and talented programs that admit fewer students on Free & Reduced lunch into their programs than the percentage of that program’s applicant pool will be evaluated as “non-compliant” with the terms of this policy by the Special Task Force on Equity in Excellence and will be instructed to make the necessary changes in their admissions policy so that their admitted student pool matches the Free & Reduced Lunch participation status of the applicant pool to the program in a reasonable time frame.

Programs that do not meet AYP are in jeopardy of losing federal funding streams, even those beyond what is designated as specifically for gifted and

talented education under the Javits Act, if applicable. The Special Task Force on Equity in Excellence is responsible for evaluating whether or not programs are meeting AYP.

Funding

This policy requires no additional funding for any parties involved, other than the costs associated with reporting racial background during the application process, which are considered negligible by this proposal.

Policy Evaluation

As mentioned above, Special Task Force on Equity in Excellence is responsible for evaluating whether or not programs are meeting AYP.

Plan of Action

This policy shall be introduced as a bill to the House of Representatives of the United States Congress, where it shall be debated and amended and eventually become law. The provisions of this law shall be in effect for a five-year time frame, at which point Congress must re-evaluate the policy and, using the data from the reports provided by the Task Force, decide whether or not this policy should be renewed.

Conclusion

This policy proposal will begin putting the pieces of the fractured gifted education policyscape back together. This policy will be the first in a series of practices designed to provide greater coherence and much-needed standardization in a field that has been plagued by intellectual and ideological silo-ing. In the future, the federal DoE should be tasked with creating a universal (and inclusive) definition of what giftedness is, so that all parties involved in gifted education can be on the same page. Additionally, current allocations set aside for gifted and talented programs at the state and federal level should be significantly increased. But to begin the work that needs to be done, this policy proposal will serve as a way for gifted education advocates to push back against critics who argue that gifted education is currently an inherently inequitable system. In other words, this policy proposal will begin the long road towards equity. By no means is this policy exhaustive,

all-inclusive, or a panacea for all of the problems afflicting gifted education; but it is an absolutely necessary start.

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