"Education for the Gifted" and "Talent Development": What Gifted Education Can Offer Education Reform in Hong Kong

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The traditional practice in providing for gifted children in our Chinese heritage and in colonial Hong Kong was briefly reviewed. Conventionally, gifted education has been defined to be restricted to the education for the identified gifted with a specific view of giftedness. However, there is now an increased acceptance of a broadened and inclusive view of giftedness, and an emphasis of gifted education as talent development for a greater number of students who might be less able. The choice between "education for the gifted" and "talent development" for all students or the majority of students might reflect the conflict between the concern for excellence and the concern for equity, or the concern for excellence of the gifted few as against the concern for excellence of all students. Reconsidering gifted education as encompassing both "education for the gifted" and "talent development" will allow an equitable pursuit of excellence for all students. In this connection, it is suggested that the gifted and talented approach developed for more able students might, with appropriate differentiation, benefit students who are less able and those who are at risk.

It is generally acknowledged that the development of gifted education in Hong Kong is relatively recent (Chan, 1998a). However, with increasing public awareness, there is a corresponding proliferation of gifted programming. These programs are largely enrichment activities in after-school, Saturday, and summer programs in primary and secondary schools, government education centers, and universities. These varieties of programs have sparked controversies regarding not only what and how but
also for whom services of these sorts should be provided. The position that
gifted education should be regarded as special provisions for the selected
group of identified gifted and talented students is often pitted against the
position that gifted education should be focused on promoting the develop­
ment of talents in every child. Nonetheless, these positions, gifted educa­
tion as “education for the gifted,” and gifted education as “talent develop­
ment” are inevitably entwined with issues of definitions of giftedness,
identification procedures, and the concerns for equity and excellence. The
subscription to one of these two positions or a position between these
extremes has great and far-reaching implications for the future policies and
development of gifted education in Hong Kong.

In the recurrent discussion about education reform in Hong Kong,
gifted education, regardless of the position that one takes, has much to
offer the reform movement in meeting new challenges in the 21st century.
To chart a course best suited for the future development of gifted education
in Hong Kong, the controversies and their underlying issues need to be
more carefully examined. Some of these issues include our subscription to
the specific and inclusive views of giftedness, identification of gifted and
talented students, differentiation of levels of giftedness, and our society’s
concern for equity and excellence in education. Thus, a review of these
issues in the context of provisions for the education of the gifted and
talented in our Chinese heritage and in colonial Hong Kong is in order.
Such a review may help explain the firmly held notion of education for the
selected gifted as currently practiced, and set the stage for better decision
making in the current reform movement.

The Chinese Heritage

While critics have often stated that gifted education has not received due
emphasis in Hong Kong as a British colony, the long tradition of valuing
and nurturing gifted and talented children in imperial China has often been
overlooked by educators in Hong Kong. In contrast, in mainland China,
Zha (1998) has traced the education for the gifted and talented in Chinese
history, and marshaled evidence to document the existence of explicit and
systematic selection procedures for the nurturing of exceptionally gifted
children, prodigies or “shen tong” (god-like children) in imperial China.

Specifically, education for the gifted and talented dated back to the
Han Dynasty (206 BC to 220 AD) and continued in various forms up to the
Qing Dynasty (1644–1911 AD). In general, the imperial courts of different
dynasties in the time span of more than 2000 years had clear policies to promote identification of precocious or gifted and talented children of age below 10, extending at times to 13. Government officials in regional municipalities were to identify and recommend these gifted and talented children or "shen tong" for public examination in "tong zi ke" (children division). There were stated formal regulations regarding age, examinations (including subject content, method, procedures, and the passing standards), and subsequent education or appointment to official posts in the empire. The emphasis however had all along been on literary abilities. The examinations were similar to those of adults in testing knowledge and comprehension of Confucian texts based on recitation. Children passing these examinations were admitted to the imperial court’s institutes of highest learning, "tai xue," "han lin yuan," or "guo zi jian," equivalent to universities of contemporary society. Despite that special considerations were given to these children in terms of opportunities for higher learning and career paths in the imperial courts, the education of the gifted and talented in imperial China has been criticized. Zha (1998), for example, noted that these children mostly came from children of the upper class and were treated as miniature adults. Inevitably, the development of their potential was focused on literary abilities, and extrinsic rewards were placed on recitation rather than creative thinking.

The Legacy of Colonial Hong Kong

The emphasis on literary abilities as the hallmark of excellence continued in colonial Hong Kong although it was recognized that a student might excel in abilities not readily manifested in academic achievement. Unlike the time of imperial China, there were no stated policies, and no special selection and nurturing procedures provided for gifted and talented students prior to the 1990s. The special learning needs of gifted and talented students, especially academically gifted students, could be regarded as being indirectly accommodated in the “elitist” educational system. Specifically, access to higher learning was awarded based on excellence in performance demonstrated in passing successively more difficult public examinations. Perhaps, apart from academic abilities, the only limitation to access to higher learning was the financial considerations of the students’ families.

The 1970s and 1980s witnessed society’s concern for equity, as educational opportunities for all students from preschool to college years were
expanded, cumulating to the promotion of equal access to educational opportunities for all students through the implementation of nine-year free education up to Secondary Three. In these years, the concern for equity overrode the concern for excellence, and hence the education for gifted and talented students was not emphasized, as any systematic programming or provisions would appear to go against the concern for equity.

The nine-year free education has resulted in the development of a common-core curriculum that is aimed to meet the learning needs of students who are of average ability. Consequently, the common-core curriculum specifies minimum standards for able students. Further, the practice of having classes of students with mixed abilities in all subject areas may also deprive high-ability students of the appropriate challenge they so desperately need. In sum, it is recognized that the common-core curriculum has failed to meet the special learning needs of highly able as well as less able students. Specifically, the recognition that differentiated services need to be provided for highly able students paves the way for the development of education for the gifted and talented in Hong Kong.

“Education for the Gifted” and the Specific View of Giftedness

In reviewing the early development of gifted education in Hong Kong, Wu and Cho (1993) referred to the pioneering enrichment work of the Extended Learning Committee of the Hong Kong International School in the 1980s. The general upsurge of interest in gifted education however only came with the issue of the fourth report of the Hong Kong Education Commission (1990), which contained the first policy statement on gifted education in Hong Kong. The report basically established gifted education as “education for the gifted” through defining giftedness, outlining the development of the types of desirable gifted programs, and specifying the student populations for which services would be targeted.

The Hong Kong Education Commission (1990) defined gifted children as those with exceptional achievement and/or potential in one or more of the following areas: (1) General intellectual ability; (2) specific academic aptitude; (3) creative or productive thinking; (4) leadership ability; (5) visual and performing arts; and (6) psychomotor ability. This is basically the definition of giftedness of the 1972 Marland report to the U.S. Congress. This U.S. Congress’ definition of giftedness has been subsequently amended in 1978 and 1988 to exclude psychomotor ability, as its
manifestations in artistic talents can be included under performing arts, and athletically gifted students are well served by other programs (Davis & Rimm, 1998). While the Education Commission has not excluded psychomotor ability in the Hong Kong definition of giftedness, it nonetheless recognized that students gifted in visual and performing arts and in athletics were well served in programs outside the mainstream school system.

With this view, the Education Commission focused on making recommendations for the academically gifted students for whom no specific provisions have been made in the mainstream school system. These academically gifted students are defined as those who possess one or more of the first three characteristics in the definition of giftedness. Specifically, the Education Commission favored the option of developing school-based programs in mainstream schools to meet the needs of academically gifted students over the option of serving their special needs in special schools. To plan for services for this targeted population of academically gifted students, it was estimated that 2% or 20,000 students aged between 6 and 18 would require gifted education services. To implement these recommendations, a professional team has been set up with the support of a gifted education resource center, the Fung Hon Chu Gifted Education Centre, for gifted students, their parents, and teachers. A pilot three-year scheme of school-based programs in 19 primary schools started in 1994, and its effectiveness was evaluated in 1997. These developments in gifted education since 1990 were documented in the subcommittee report of special education by the Hong Kong Board of Education (1996). This report also suggested modes of teacher training in gifted education, and reaffirmed the promotion of gifted education as “education for the gifted.” Particularly worthy of note is a reference made to the possibility of transferring gifted education experiences to students who might be less able.

Despite that the U.S. federal legislated definition of giftedness with its major purpose of expanding the concept of giftedness beyond IQ scores is accepted in Hong Kong, the identification of gifted students in schools frequently depends on IQ assessment at the service centers of the Education Department. Using a cutoff IQ score of 130 for identifying gifted students, one would expect that only a small percentage of students (statistically 2.5% are above two standard deviations) would be classified as gifted and eligible for services provided in gifted programs. Even if multiple criteria for classification are employed, and using a cutoff score or percentile score (e.g., 95th percentile) on any one of the multiple measures...
on intelligence, achievement, and creativity, the identification procedure would again yield a small number of gifted students eligible for gifted education.

"Talent Development" and the Inclusive View of Giftedness

The reliance on IQ as the only assessment to identify gifted students has been the practice of the Education Department since the 1980s when the Hong Kong Wechsler Intelligence Scale for Children (HK-WISC) was normed and standardized against the Hong Kong population (Psychological Corporation, 1984). Admission to gifted education services at the Fung Hon Chu Gifted Education Centre requires IQ assessment and an IQ score of 130 or above. However, the biases and limitations of the IQ tests are now gradually and fully recognized, and new theories of multiple talents offer attractive options to the view that only general intelligence assessed by IQ test is important. The introduction of the U.S. federal definition of giftedness in the report of the Hong Kong Education Commission (1990) has thus highlighted the need for assessment using multiple measures in the identification procedures.

While IQ tests are typically employed in identification procedures, they are not sufficient when one would like to know about a student's creative potential or creativity, as creativity and general intelligence are not strongly correlated, and perhaps correlated only at the lower levels below some moderate threshold (Runco & Albert, 1986). Thus, it has been maintained that creative students may have only moderate general intelligence, and exceptionally high general intelligence may actually preclude creative work (Simonton, 1994). Given that creativity and possibly other gifts and talents cannot be predicted from general intelligence, it is no surprise that IQ is now regarded as one of the many criteria, and multiple talents and student profiles should be used to identify gifted students.

Admitting that there are multiple talents and hence multiple criteria for identifying and selecting students for gifted programs, it has to be noted that there are also multiple ways to define multiple talents. Perhaps, the largest number of possible talents was suggested by Guilford's structure of intellect model that described 180 distinct kinds of ability (Guilford, 1983). A different perspective that has found support from many educators in Hong Kong was provided by Gardner (1983) who described seven domains or intelligences that included verbal-linguistic, logical-mathematical, bodily-kinesthetic, spatial, musical, intrapersonal, and interpersonal
domains. Gardner (1983) claimed that all these domains had their own core characteristics and developmental prerequisites, and the list of domains is expanding into the naturalist domain, and the spiritual or moral domains. Thus, it is not just the conception of cognitive ability that has broadened and become more specific, the broadening of talent includes other non-cognitive variables and aptitudes such as motivation (e.g., Piechowski, 1997; Renzulli, 1986; Runco & Chand, 1995). The broad and inclusive view is also apparent when references are made to different kinds of giftedness such as analytic, synthetic, and practical giftedness as suggested by Sternberg (1997).

Presumably, a broad and inclusive view of giftedness allows assessment to use profiles instead of one single score, and should facilitate more accurate identification of gifted students. It is also noteworthy that the inclusive view is consistent with society's concern for equity, and the educational and learning theories that emphasize the individuality of each student. Thus, this inclusive view brings us closer to the educational ideals of all parents and teachers that every student has equitable access to receive appropriate education and to develop his or her specific talents.

Despite the desirability of the inclusive approach, it has the potential problem when new domains of giftedness continue to be included, and when dimensions of giftedness continue to be extended such that a point may be reached that every student has at least one exceptional skill or aptitude. If more and more new dimensions of giftedness are added to the student profiles of talent, eventually these profiles will become so extensive that every student will be above average in at least one domain. While such extensive profiles would reduce the probability that gifted students could be overlooked, there would be a blurring of giftedness and individual differences to a point that giftedness will become synonymous with individual differences. The trends toward an increased number of talent domains hopefully should stop before the number of talent domains is equivalent to the full range of possible individual differences. Ideally, the trend will lead to an optimal number of dimensions, with which the full range of possible talent domains can be recognized (Runco, 1997).

With multiple criteria for identification of gifted students based on multiple talents or gifted domains, it can be anticipated that not only 2 to 3 percent of the student population but a larger percentage of students might be identified to be able to benefit from gifted education services. Thus, gifted education will no longer be restricted to "education for the gifted" as traditionally defined to cover a small selected group of students,
but extends to “talent development” for 10 to 20 percent of the student population, or even to the majority or all students (Treffinger & Feldhusen, 1996). Nonetheless, the targeted population to be served depends not only on the criteria for identification, but also on the notion of the levels of giftedness.

Issues in Identification and Levels of Giftedness

It has to be noted that there is no universally accepted definition of giftedness even among educators in gifted education (e.g., Gagne, 1991; Gardner, 1983, 1993; Ramos-Ford & Gardner, 1997; Renzulli, 1986; Sternberg, 1997; Taylor, 1978). How giftedness is conceptualized and defined will determine the choice of program models, what types of gifted programs for what student populations should be developed, who may be selected for the special services of a gifted program, and what the associated selection or identification procedures will be (Davis & Rimm, 1998). The particular definition of giftedness may also have great implications for issues of possible charges of discrimination in the identification process against special populations, availability of opportunities for different types of gifts or talents in different programming practices, and the positive or adverse effects of being labeled gifted.

In Hong Kong, the development of gifted programs has been hampered by the lack of assessment instruments for identifying and selecting gifted students for services. In view of the lack of appropriate instruments for assessing different aspects of giftedness of even the academically gifted students, the Education Department in 1992 commissioned a professional team of researchers to study the use of the Torrance Tests of Creative Thinking (TTCT; Spinks, Ku-Yu, Shek, & Bacon-Shone, 1995), and the Renzulli Scales of Rating the Behavioral Characteristics of Superior Students (SRBCSS; Ku-Yu, Shek, & Yung, 1994a, 1994b; Renzulli, Smith, White, Callahan, & Hartman, 1976) in Hong Kong. Both the TTCT and the SRBCSS have been translated into Chinese and have been used in Taiwan. The Hong Kong versions of TTCT and SRBCSS are adapted from the Taiwanese Chinese versions, and the SRBCSS have teacher and parent observation forms. Based on these instruments, the same professional team of researchers was also requested to estimate the prevalence of gifted students, their distribution and characteristics in primary schools in Hong Kong. It is anticipated that, with the available observation checklists for teacher and parent nominations, and standardized instruments for the
assessment of intelligence, academic attainment, and creativity, identification of the academically gifted students for gifted programs will pose less of a problem.

However, even with the availability of reliable and valid assessment instruments for identification, the eventual selection of students for programs depends on a host of other factors. Among them are the nature and type of programs, the number of participants that can be accommodated, the optimal cutoffs on identification measures, and the levels of giftedness. Specifically, it is evident that a program designed for accelerated learning in mathematics will admit students gifted in mathematical reasoning or quantitative ability, whereas a program designed for leadership training may admit students with identified leadership potential or any gifted students on the assumption that they should know about the rudiments of leadership. Capacity permitted, one may admit all gifted students above a desirable cutoff on identification measures. If there are more identified gifted students than those to be admitted, then differentiation on levels of giftedness in terms of mildly, moderately, highly, and extraordinary gifted may be helpful (e.g., Gross, 1994), as programs designed for the mildly gifted may not be challenging for exceptionally gifted students. The complexity of the selection procedures will multiply when multiple criteria and multiple measures on multiple talents are involved. Thus, when it comes down to the eventual admission of gifted students into specific programs, the complicated procedures go beyond mere identification.

Balancing Equity and Excellence in Gifted Education

The brief historical review about development of gifted education and issues in identification in Hong Kong has revealed that there is now increasing attention on gifted education, and suggested that gifted education has much to offer for the current reform movement (Reis, 1995). While in pre-1997 Hong Kong, the concern was on equity in terms of providing equal opportunity to access education for all students, the overriding concern in post-1997 has been on excellence and quality education for all students. In this connection, “education for the gifted,” especially for a small group of identified gifted students with talents in specific domains, may invoke charges of elitism. However, equity and excellence need not be in conflict, as they together will provide a complimentary and enhancing view of educational goals today. The concern for excellence for a selected group of gifted students does not go against and should be extended to the
concern for excellence for all students. In this view, equity can be interpreted to imply providing individual students with equal opportunities to pursue his or her individual goals toward excellence. In a similar manner, excellence can be interpreted to imply the enhancement of strength and talent in individual students so that each student may realize his or her fullest potential and work toward the highest level of his or her abilities. Thus, the equitable pursuit of excellence lies in talent development for all students, the at-risk and less able, the able, and the highly able or talented.

While we should not subscribe to the view that every child is gifted, gifted education should encompass not only "education for the gifted" but also "talent development" for all students. It is important that programs, practices, and experiences in education for the gifted and talented should be used to benefit all students (Chan, 1998b). Recognizing that there is a continuum of handicap and giftedness, ranging, for example, from handicap to weakness, to strength, and to talent, education should be differentiated and directed to different levels of handicap and of giftedness. It is only through a gifted and talented approach that students may be helped to overcome handicaps and weaknesses and turn them into strengths and talents to be developed (Chan, 2000). Gifted education should not be regarded as merely "education for the gifted" and restricted to a small group of students identified as gifted using IQ or achievement scores. Gifted education should also encompass "talent development" of all students, including highly able learners and at-risk students, profiled on multiple talent domains, such that a more exciting learning environment can be created and quality education can be ensured for all students.

**Programming for Talent Development**

If we accept the dual roles of gifted education, our goal in gifted education should aim to find ways to develop the talents and special aptitudes of as many students as possible, while recognizing the special needs of highly gifted and talented students for learning experiences at a level and pace appropriate to their abilities. All students need challenging learning experiences, and we can provide them only when we as well as they themselves know the nature and level of their special talents. In this regard, we have much to learn from the North American experience in talent identification and programming in schools. Indeed, there are a variety of conceptual models guiding curriculum development and school-based programming for "talent development." These include the
Schoolwide Enrichment Model (SEM; Renzulli, 1994; Renzulli & Reis, 1998), the Talent Identification and Development in Education (TIDE) Model (Feldhusen, 1995), and the Levels of Services (LoS) Approach (Treffinger, 1997). While these models differ in their emphases and implementation, their programming approaches commonly address different types or levels of services and activities, ranging from a broadly inclusive array of activities designed to suit all or a majority of students to a particular set of services crafted to respond to the talents demonstrated by a small number of students. The provision of such activities and services is entirely consistent with, and supportive of, many fundamental principles of effective schooling. The University-School Tripartite Model of Talent Development (Chan, 1998b) initiated at the Chinese University of Hong Kong represents one such approach that highlights the importance of university-school collaboration that will enable us to translate today’s educational goals in gifted education in terms of both “education for the gifted” and “talent development” into practical realities. Thus, the integration of these models into a flexible, dynamic and contemporary approach to identification and programming may provide us a foundation on which we can build effective practices in our reformed schools in the 21st century.

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