3 | LESSONS LEARNED FROM EVALUATING PROGRAMS FOR THE GIFTED PROMISING PRACTICES AND PRACTICAL PITFALLS

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There are many articles written on the importance of evaluating a gifted program (e.g., Callahan, 1983; Seeley, 1986). Several authors have produced books, monographs and articles which provide guidance to administrators who wish to evaluate their gifted programs (Callahan & Caldwell, 1984, 1986, 1995; Renzulli, 1975; Tomlinson & Callahan, 1993). And many articles report on the outcomes of such evaluations (e.g., Callahan, Covert, Aylesworth, & Vanco, 1981; Enersen, 1993; Moon, 1995). however, there are many lessons learned in evaluating gifted programs that are unreported because they are not research studies in the traditional sense.

Over the past several years my colleagues and I have been evaluating gifted programs in sites ranging from large, urban school settings to small, rural communities. We have been in schools where gifted students were served as part of homogeneous classes and heterogeneous class; we have evaluated pullout programs; cluster group programs, full-time programs for the gifted and special schools; we have gathered data on students experiencing their first year in school and those finishing university degrees; and we have visited some programs which have existed for more than 30 years and some that are less than 3 years old. As a result of these evaluations we have come to learn many practical lessons about effective programs for the gifted and about the process of evaluation. These lessons are offered here as the basis for recommendations to administrators and teachers as they

plan programs for gifted students, develop curriculum and instructional strategies, guide teachers through staff development, and evaluate their programs.

Lessons for the Program Developer and Teachers of the Gifted

As we have evaluated programs for the gifted certain patterns emerge which distinguish programs which are held in high esteem from those which are not valued in the community. These features also distinguish the programs that students and parents judge to be challenging and beneficial. The discussion of these elements is organized around those key features of gifted programs outlined by Renzulli (1975).

PROGRAM PHILOSOPHY AND DEFINITION

Good programs for the gifted and talented are based on a thorough examination of the values of the community and a sound philosophy about gifted children and appropriate education for these children. In order to ensure the long term support of the school community, it is imperative that program planners and administrators carefully examine the needs of gifted students within the context of the local school.

One of the most consistent discrepancies between an excellent program and one which struggles to provide appropriate services lies in the existence and application of a sound philosophy regarding the role of the gifted program in the school. When a gifted program exists as a clear means of meeting particular learning needs of a carefully described group of exceptional learners, then the program developers have a touchstone to which they can constantly refer as they plan and implement services for gifted students. In cases where no philosophy exists or where the philosophy is vague or unknown to the personnel in the gifted program, we tend to find only disjointed program components which fail to address the needs of any particular population. A philosophy of giftedness which is useful will have the following characteristics:

- It will reflect the current theory and research in gifted education.
- It will clearly identify the reasons why there is a need for serving the special learning needs of the gifted learner.
- It will be consistent with the general philosophy of education in the school system.
- It will clearly delineate beliefs about the characteristics of the gifted learner.

   – It will state the expected goals of services to be provided for gifted
     learners.

   A sound philosophy for a gifted program will provide the basis for a clear
definition of the students to be served by the program and the types of
services that will be offered to them. An explicit definition of gifted or gifted
and talented is often lacking in programs for gifted students. Too often,
school administrators rely on implicit definitions or definitions too vague to
operationalize in either student identification or program planning. We need
to know who the gifted and talented population is, why this population has
special needs and what those special needs might be.

STUDENT IDENTIFICATION AND PLACEMENT

   The philosophy and definition statements should provide clear direction
for the development of the student identification process and it should guide
placement decisions. The definition should be used as the standard against
which the identification procedures are held. Instruments should be selected
or constructed that reflect the characteristics described in the philosophy
and definition statements. Finally, the procedures used to evaluate data
collected on the students must be carefully structured to ensure that the
interpretations of the information result in the identification of students with
special needs. Many schools fail to reflect their philosophy in their
identification processes. For example, schools often use convenient,
available test data (from other testing programs designed for student
assessment of achievement) or inexpensive strategies (teacher ratings) not
valid for selecting highly talented students. There is little attempt on the part
of most schools to determine the degree to which the identification process
results in appropriate placements. Or schools establish a philosophy and
definition based on broadened conceptions of giftedness, then use a matrix
score for identification which results in all weight resting on the intelligence
test score because of its greater variability. For an identification process to be
valid, several critical questions must be addressed.

   Are we finding all (or at least nearly all) students whose needs are not
being met in the regular classroom using the traditional curriculum and
instructional practices? Programs which have specifically sought to identify
the underachiever as well as the high achiever, the students with special
talents in areas other than the academics (music, art, etc.) and the child
whose socio-economic or' cultural experiences may preclude easy
identification present the soundest identification procedures.

   While we must ask whether we are missing students that we should be
identifying, we must also ask whether we are identifying children who

should not be identified for special services beyond the regular curricular offerings? When we do not have clear agreements between the definitions and the strategies for identification, we often find teachers, parents, and sometimes even students, questioning the identification and placement process, particularly when they have evidence that the traditional curriculum is meeting those students needs. The answers to these questions are not easy, particularly when teachers are not aware of the characteristics of the gifted and rely on definitions that are narrow and encompass only high performing students. In those cases, teachers may not recognize the needs of the child with a learning disability who may also be gifted or the underachieving gifted student.

Does our identification process yield data to help us select appropriate services and plan appropriate curricular differentiation? Those school districts that design their identification procedures in such a way that the data collected provides evidence of specific learner characteristics and needs are most successful in addressing program and curricular needs. Data collected in the identification process is incomplete if it only answers the question: Is this child gifted or not? Our purpose should not be to label children. Our identification process should answer the question: What special learning needs does this child have?

THE CURRICULUM

Curricular Planning. Sound support for gifted programs comes from careful planning to ensure that the program offered is defensible as appropriate for gifted students. Specifying a philosophy and definition of giftedness, matching the identification process to the philosophy and identifying learner needs, provides a sound basis for constructing a curriculum to address those needs The most frequent criticism of gifted programs uncovered in our evaluations stems from a perception that the curricular offerings provided to the gifted would be appropriate for all children. Or that the curricular offerings provide special privileges to the gifted child. Too often, these perceptions are justified. Everyday, teachers who plan and deliver instruction to the gifted need to ask themselves the three critical questions that Passow (1982) posed: Could all students do this? Should all students do this? Would all students do this? If the answer to any one of these questions is yes, then they need to re-visit and revise their lessons. Curriculum that is challenging enough that students with exceptional ability are challenged and engaged in learning will not be appropriate for all students, other students would not find the tasks and activities within their range of accomplishment at the same level the gifted student might. The challenge of the curriculum for gifted students may come from alterations of the curriculum along several dimensions including (Tomlinson, 1995):

- a higher level of abstractness;
- greater depth and complexity of content, process or product produced;
- a more rapid pace of learning or task completion;
- tasks requiring multiple directions, problems with many facets, products or outcomes from ill-formed and open-ended problems;
- mastery of content or production of products that require greater leaps of insight or more indirect applications or significant transfer of learning;
- sophistication of level of resources used in learning.

The second most frequent criticism that is offered during the evaluation of gifted programs is that the curriculum is "fun and games" or of little value to any students. Sometimes this criticism is based on a perception that the teacher who works with the gifted student does not offer the most engaging and meaningful curricular options to the gifted. Accordingly, the second set of questions the teacher needs to ask are:

Is the content of this lesson enduring and lasting?

Will these lessons have meaning for my students and teach concepts, principles and generalizations that will serve them throughout their lives?

Am I teaching the critical and core concepts in the disciplines?

Do these instructional activities require the students to transform rather than reproduce knowledge?

Do these activities require the depth and complexity of thinking of which gifted students are capable?

In evaluations of gifted programs we have found that teachers planning curriculum and instructional activities for the gifted are often hampered in their efforts to address these questions because of the lack of richness in the core curriculum. Building a differentiated curriculum of value necessitates a sound core curriculum from which the differentiated curriculum can emerge.

Students in gifted programs often fail to achieve the expected outcomes because of several flaws in curriculum planning that are seemingly obvious, but often not addressed. First is failure to base the program on a model likely to lead to stated goals and objectives. We often see students engaged in learning process skills when the goals and objectives of the curriculum and the assessment tools used to measure the outcomes are content-oriented. Or we see teachers teaching content or process in isolation, but expecting students to use their learning in the production of products. Even more often we observe each teacher of the gifted independently constructing and

delivering curriculum based on his or her particular training or the information gleaned from the last conference or workshop attended. This results in disjointed and non-developmental curriculum. In these cases, the spiral curriculum of Bruner fails to materialize and students do not have the opportunity to build on prior knowledge and skill. The frameworks and foundations of understanding established at one level are not used as a base for later understanding, and consequently, students are not able to maximize in-depth understanding of concepts, generalizations and principles. This failure to attend to scope and sequence of by program planners and administrators and teachers has unfortunate consequences. Students who are provided special curricular activities may often repeat learning or may do the same project for many teachers at different grade levels or in different disciplines with clever adjustments for the particular class. They may never see any relationship between what they learn in one year and the curriculum of the next year and may never be challenged to full potential because teachers have failed to ensure that information about prior accomplishments, learnings and projects are communicated across grades and across disciplines.

Finally, teachers have often been trained to modify curriculum along only one dimension of curricular planning. These teachers may address the content for gifted students, or the process/thinking skills dimension of curriculum, or differentiate products. The more effective teachers are those who have been able to balance and coordinate the differentiation of content, process, and product; thus connecting and inter-relating the three aspects of differentiation. Schools which have taken care to base curricular efforts on a sound model of curriculum for gifted children are at distinct advantage in attaining the desired goals of the program. While few schools adopt any model in its entirety or in its purest forms, those that have adopted and adapted a model or blended complimentary models that provide a clear direction to follow with an appropriate balance between content, process and product outcomes are most successful in achieving outcomes valued by the students and the community.

Curricula which address specific learner characteristics are most successful with gifted students. Teachers of the gifted must remember that while gifted students march to the beat of a different drummer, they do not all march to the beat of the same different drummer. Hence, successful teachers of the gifted do not attempt to offer the same differentiated instruction to all gifted students. They are cognizant of differences in levels of performance within the population of gifted and talented learners, of different interests, of learning styles, and of variety in cultural experiences.

Teachers who are successful with gifted students also never forget that the basic principles of learning and child development apply to gifted students as well. They are constantly assessing their students in order to be sure that the

next learning activities are in the range of what Vygotsky calls the zone of proximal development – that level at which the student cannot automatically respond, but with a minimal amount of instruction will be able to attain the new learning and production level. These successful teachers of the gifted are also aware of the importance of seeking to address the child's interests, using interests as a hook or enticement to learning. They are cognizant of basic developmental stages, taking care not to present abstract concepts until the child is able to grasp the abstraction. Gifted children may be able to grasp abstract concepts at an earlier age, but may still need to go through the concrete stage of learning the concept in many cases.

Successful teachers of the gifted and talented are also able to encourage creativity, but in the most meaningful ways. Rather than focusing on the teaching of isolated skills of creativity such as brainstorming or other heuristics, they help children learn to identify problems worthy of solution, guide them to the use of the heuristics in the solutions of the problems, underscore the importance of a strong understanding of the discipline in creative productivity, and recognize the child's accomplishments in creative domains. They are able to recognize and provide appropriate feedback when a child engages in a process or problem may be new to the child even though its solution is algorithmic to the discipline (see Amabile (1996) for more detail). But more importantly, they are able to guide the child to new problems that extend the child's problem solving into real problems without known solutions (Renzulli, 1977).

Meeting social, emotional and counseling needs of the gifted. The literature on gifted education has for years stressed the particularly unique social and emotional development of gifted children (e.g., Delisle, 1990; Maxwell, 1995; Silverman, 1993). Our evaluations indicate that program planners have had a difficult time determining the role that attention to these needs should play. The result is often one of two extreme positions. On one end of the continuum we find an undue emphasis on –even preoccupation with– potential problems that gifted students must deal with and many activities in the curriculum which explore perfectionism, anorexia, underachievement, etc. In these cases, some students are appreciative of the concern, but others raise questions about attention being focused on problems they don't have. One student said, "I was feeling quite good about myself until everyone kept telling me that I should be having problems. Does being gifted mean I must have all these problems?" At the other extreme, there are schools and programs where there is an almost total lack of attention to these issues. In these cases, there may not even be appropriate counseling and guidance services available from counselors who have had even minimal background in dealing with the particular issues that might face a gifted child who is having difficulty with social or emotional issues or in making appropriate decisions relative to college or career choices. Once again, the degree to which schools that have been

successful in achieving an appropriate level of attention to social, emotional and counseling needs of gifted students are those whose philosophy of education for gifted students provided a balanced view of the cognitive and affective needs of the students.

Assessment Issues. One area in which gifted educators have traditionally taken pride has been their use of alternative or authentic assessments as part of instruction and evaluation. Some designs for gifted programs explicitly call for product outcomes. For example, Renzulli's Enrichment Triad (1977) and Schoolwide Enrichment Models (Renzulli & Reis, 1985) explicitly call for type III Activities as hallmarks of appropriate curricular activities for the gifted. These activities are characterized as individual or small group "real life" investigations on a real problems with a real audience in mind. Similarly, Kaplan's (1986) framework for curriculum development includes a component explicitly calling for products which serve as both tools of learning and verification of learning. Accordingly, educators have been urged to use authentic assessments to evaluate and provide feedback to gifted students (Reis, 1984). The keys to making the use of product assessments meaningful are twofold. First, we must find ways to set appropriate benchmarks for gifted learners. As Eva Baker and John Schacter (1996) suggest, this may be attained by looking for good descriptions of expert performance. Our standards of excellence for gifted students have too often been set as "better than others my age" rather than as the level of performance of those who are accomplished. Interestingly, children with talent in athletics learn at a very young age to look to models of adult accomplishment. We need to find ways to incorporate this strategy into our gifted programs.

Once appropriate standards of excellence or expert performance have been identified, educators must ensure that the rubrics (scoring guidelines) used to evaluate the student clearly describe for the learner the progression of development from novice level performance to expert performance. Schack (1994) has effectively outlined such a rubric for adolescent research projects. Wiggins(1996) has provided us with some initial dimensions or criteria for scoring. He suggests we consider impact by evaluating the degree of effectiveness of the product (Does it solve the problem, persuade an audience, etc.?) and the level of the quality of the product (Is it outstanding in its class, novel, ethical, etc.?). He also suggests assessing the process of creating the product. Is it purposeful (efficient, adaptive, self-critical, etc.)? Is it thoughtful (considerate, responsive, inquisitive, etc.)? And finally, does the student use the appropriate skills? These skills would be those linked to the task and product and would be situation-specific for each product.

Wiggins also suggests that the form of the product should be rated. He recommends looking to see if the product is well-designed (Does form follow

function? Is the product authentic? Is it elegant? Is it clever?). Is the product well-crafted (organized, prices, clear, mechanically sound, etc.)? Another dimension he lists as important is style. He recommends consideration of the voice (Is it authentic? Is the style of the product graceful?) And of course Wiggins would consider the content to be important. He includes accuracy (correctness, validity, etc.), sophistication (depth, insightfulness, power, expertise, etc.), and aptness (focus) within this category.

Wiggins also provides examples of ways in which exemplary models have been collected for setting the highest level of performance we might require for gifted students. He suggests looking at the products of older students for models for younger students and the models of experts for the more advanced students. Others have suggested that students also identify accomplished works and derive the criteria from their own understanding of excellence.

TEACHER SELECTION AND TRAINING

While solid and defensible curriculum is necessary for the success of any educational program, so is the selection of teachers who are capable and willing to deliver the curriculum in exciting and engaging ways. In a recent evaluation we found several factors which contributed to inappropriate staffing of teachers. In some cases, teachers were selected on the basis of seniority in the system rather than on the basis of their expertise in the disciplines and their skill in using strategies appropriate for engaging the gifted students. The lack of in-depth understanding of disciplines resulted in shallow and cursory coverage of content. Gifted students tell us that they do not expect their teachers to "know everything," but they do expect that their teachers will also be "students" of the discipline.

The selection of teachers who did not have the instructional skills to teach the students resulted in the use of limited and/or inappropriate teaching strategies (e.g., overuse of lecture or lecture/discussion) rather than strategies that required students to engage the subject matter actively through the processing of information, the production of sophisticated problem solutions, or the investigation of meaningful problems and issues.

Because few pre-service training programs (teacher preparatory programs) provide specific instruction in how to accommodate the special needs of the gifted students, few beginning teachers are ready for the challenge of teaching these students. Until there are major changes in the system of preparing teachers, schools must provide the appropriate training for their teachers of the gifted – whether these are the teachers teaching in

homogeneously grouped classrooms or specialist teachers working with gifted students as their full-time assignment. Successful programs were those that provided systematic staff development based on the goals and objectives of the program, the specific curricular modifications and strategies appropriate for achieving the goals, and *training which focused on the specific needs of the teachers rather than one-size fits all training for teachers. Not surprisingly, teachers* (like their students) need differentiated instruction because of their varied levels of expertise, interests and learning styles.

Unfortunately, we also have found many situations in which teachers who were employed to work with gifted many years ago (and were highly qualified and prepared at that time) have not been provided with nor have they independently sought out the opportunities to remain current with developments in the field of gifted education – often using practices which would have been considered "state of the art" in 1970, but not in 1997. In those schools where teachers have kept abreast of current ideas and practices, the principals or administrators in charge of gifted programs assumed that their role was to monitor the ways in which gifted students needs were being met by teachers in the instructional program and to provide opportunities for teachers to learn the skills necessary to accomplish that task. Of course, this suggests that the administrative staffs of schools must be aware of the appropriate ways to meet the needs of gifted students.

Mentors. The use of mentors in providing services for gifted students is receiving increased attention in the field. The person outside of schools who either comes to school to work with the gifted or works with gifted students in their work setting is considered a valuable resource in extending learning options for the gifted. However, we have found that the degree to which the mentorship is successful is highly dependent on the selection of mentors that 1) have interests and careers that match student interests, 2) relate to students of the age level of the students to whom they are matched, and 3) have the time to spend in regularly interacting with the student. The cases in which we have found mentorships to be most successful are those in which there has been a very committed individual involved in finding mentorships, in providing the mentors careful guidance in how to interact with the students, and in meeting with and guiding the students in maximizing the mentorship experience. Also mentorships which required a product or journal analysis and regular reporting and feedback were most beneficial to student. Successful mentorships were also characterized by active involvement of students. Placement in situations where the student never feels part of the "action," may easily result in assessments that the particular field and career are boring.

PROGRAM ORGANIZATION AND OPERATION

Renzulli (1975) includes general staff orientation, administrative responsibility and leadership, functional adequacy of the organization, financial allocation and provision for evaluation as critical components of this dimension of gifted programs. The kinds of staff orientations which have been critical in successful programs have been those characterized by careful planning of staff development aimed at making the general staff partners in providing appropriate services for gifted students and those that took special care to involve and orient the general staff in the development and applications of the philosophy of gifted education. In particular, special care was taken to ensure that the need for special services was not tied to inadequacy of other staff or the general program. Programs that involved the instructional support network (library or media staff personnel, school psychologists, and other specialists) were able to bring more resources to the task of providing appropriate services for the gifted.

Administrative responsibility and leadership were a key to success in programs which had a solid community support base. When administrative responsibility was assigned to individuals with many other responsibilities which had greater priority in the school setting, the gifted program had often drifted from its original conception. The administrator who was given a title, but no access to budget or staffing decisions had less likelihood of achieving program goals. Finally, those leaders who were given the position by default were seldom able to muster the energy or enthusiasm for successful leadership of the program.

Interestingly, the delivery of services for gifted students was often hampered greatly by other, seemingly unrelated, issues in the school. In one school system, the procedures for hiring teachers made it impossible for the administrator of the gifted program to have a voice in selecting teachers who would work with gifted students. In another system, a site-based management system with no school accountability relative to school district philosophy resulted in severe weakening of the gifted program.

Another shortcoming we frequently uncovered was the way in which resources were allocated and expended in gifted programs. Too often, schools had added on additional services, the same number of teachers were providing services to more children, and staff had taken on many new responsibilities with no increase in the financial allocation to the program. Existing services were weakened and the quality of services steadily decline. While many staff are urged to "work smarter" not harder, it became obvious in many schools that decisions about assignments, instructional activities, and the opportunity to provide quality feedback on student performance

were limited by the degree to which teachers were serving more students than they could reasonably handle.

A FINAL CONCERN

In nearly every gifted program we have evaluated there have been disgruntled groups of individuals who felt as if their children were gifted, but were not being identified and served as gifted. There were also many parents of identified children who questioned the adequacy of the services provided. In many cases, these complaints could be traced to the conception of most schools that they should provide a program instead of a range of service delivery models. Schools would make a decision that all gifted students would go to a resource room, or all gifted students would be served by differentiating instruction in the regular classroom, or all gifted students would have mentorships. They then sought students who fit their model of a gifted program. Any student who failed to fit that model could not be gifted. In those schools where the administrators had succeeded in providing multiple options for gifted students, the satisfaction level of parents, teachers and students was much higher.

Lessons for the Evaluator

IDENTIFYING AND INVOLVING THE REAL STAKEHOLDERS

In early writing on the evaluation of gifted programs, Renzulli, Archambault, & Callahan (1973) noted the importance of involving individuals they called Prime Interest Groups in identifying the important evaluation concerns. The apparent prime interest groups are the participants in and "consumers" of the program (students in the program, parents, teachers of the gifted, school board members, etc.). However, it is also important to involve less apparent stakeholders. For example, if students are served in a resource room, the regular classroom teachers have a vested interest in the success their students both in their achievements in the regular classroom and the resource room. This concept of involving stakeholder has been re-emphasized many times; however, the importance of uncovering conflicting issues and concerns and the real concerns cannot be overemphasized. The results of early discussions often reveal that there are groups within the community that hold widely differing expectations about the kind of questions that will be explored, the outcomes that will be assessed and the kinds of recommendations that will be made. In one case, we discovered that the parents were convinced that we had been selected

because we were opposed to the philosophy of the gifted program and had been instructed to find evidence to eliminate the services provided to gifted students; while the principals were convinced we had been hired to expand services in district. In another school district, the teachers in the program believed we were hired to eliminate their positions.

In many cases, the stakeholders have very political agendas. In one case, the leader of a parent advisory board was clearly interested in changing the leadership of the program and sought to structure the evaluation to bring about that change, or may one group wanted us to find "proof" that the gifted program was responsible for the moral ruin of the students enrolled in it. The evaluator must listen to and respond to all stakeholders, but the evaluator must keep one primary adage in mind: The students who are gifted and in need of special programs are most affected by the evaluation. It is our duty to provide evidence that will make the services provided to gifted children most appropriately meet their needs.

PAPER VS. PRACTICE

In the process of preparing for an evaluation, an evaluator is wise to review the program documents, but the evaluator will be wiser still to be skeptical about the information contained in the documents. The first order of questioning for an evaluator should be to investigate the degree to which the documentation matches the actual program. Unfortunately, many program documents seem to be known only to a very few administrators and teachers and often the practices in classrooms and in many other aspects of the program do not resemble the documentation. The evaluation may require two separate components: a review of the school's "ideal program" or the proposed plan and a review of the "actual program" which are the on-going activities.

THE SIGNIFICANT PERSONAL INVESTMENT OF THE ADMINISTRATOR

As we have evaluated programs, we have observed that most program administrators are very invested in their programs – even those who have only held the positions for a brief period of time and are extremely defensive when hearing about the flaws in their program. This investment occurs in all types of programs whether it is a special school for gifted children or a program offered in a regular classroom setting. While one might be very direct and emphatic that the evaluation is to be conducted to identify strengths of the program and suggest areas of improvement, program administrators are likely to see all critical comments aimed directly at

themselves. It is important to remember two important aspects: First, intermittent formative evaluation data can be very useful and allows for gradual adjustments in program functions. It also helps to guard against an overwhelming sense of criticism when a final report lists shortcomings of a program's operations. Second, remember that program administrators are doing the best they can with their knowledge level and the circumstances under which they operate. The context is often as important as the program itself. It is thus imperative to help the program administrator find specific strategies for making the changes to improve the services. Suggestions of change in addition to findings are more likely to be received positively than are lists of criticisms. This means, of course, that the context must be considered in the recommendations. Otherwise all recommendations will be dismissed as "impossible."

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RESUMEN*

Lecciones aprendidas de la evaluación de programas
para superdotados:
Prácticas prometedoras y peligros de la práctica

Al mundo de la educación de los superdotados con frecuencia le precede la buena teoría y la investigación, pero, en ocasiones, no somos conscientes de las pautas prácticas que se derivan de evaluaciones realizadas sobre otros programas para alumnos superdotados y con talento. En este artículo, he utilizado mi experiencia como evaluadora en la identificación de los puntos fuertes y débiles de los programas con el objetivo de señalar áreas comunes en las que se falla y recomendar prácticas básicas que han contribuido al éxito de la atención a los superdotados. Las recomendaciones para administradores y profesores pueden agruparse en cinco categorías que ya fueron apuntadas por primera vez por Renzulli (1975): filosofía y definición del programa, identificación y ubicación del alumno, currículum, entrenamiento y selección del profesor y organización y aplicación del programa. *La premisa básica para cualquier programación de gran calidad surge de una definición sólida de superdotación y de una filosofía de servicio a los alumnos superdotados que sea coherente con dicha definición y que se base en los principios seguidos por el resto de las filosofías educativas de la escuela. Además, la filosofía de la atención debería estar en consonancia con las necesidades del alumno superdotado que se hayan detectado como consecuencia de la definición adoptada. Cuando se presta la debida atención a este aspecto del desarrollo del programa, aumenta la probabilidad de que otros componentes del mismo logren también una alta calidad. Igualmente, la identificación e inclusión del alumno superdotado en un programa debería ser el resultado de la definición de superdotación de la que se parte. Y aún más, la ubicación del alumno tendría que realizarse de acuerdo con sus necesidades, y no sobre la base de que todos los estudiantes superdotados deban ajustarse a un determinado programa y a una oferta curricular concreta.*

También es importante que el currículum esté basado en las características de los alumnos identificados. Una de las principales limitaciones de las opciones curriculares para estos alumnos es el fracaso a la hora de ofrecer un currículum que satisfaga los dos criterios de Passow (1982), el currículum debería ser un currículum que los otros alumnos no pudieran hacer, y no debieran hacer. Por otro lado, dicho currículum ha de basarse en prin-

cipios sólidos de desarrollo, reflejando la atención a la complejidad creciente, abstracción, ritmo, apertura, independencia, reflexión, transferencia, y el uso de recursos a niveles sofisticados. Incluso, las ofertas de programa deberían representar oportunidades para el apropiado desarrollo cognitivo, social y emocional del alumno superdotado. La dimensión curricular junto a la evaluación son también objeto de modificación para los alumnos superdotados, de forma que se asegure que su aprendizaje conduce al logro de la excelencia en sentido absoluto más que relativo al grupo de iguales y que están aprendiendo a elaborar productos que reflejan el hacer propio de prácticos e investigadores en las disciplinas.

La formación y la selección realizada por los profesores se basan tanto en la habilidad como en la actitud hacia la enseñanza de los superdotados. Habría que seleccionar a los profesores, en función de su conocimiento sobre las características y necesidades de estos alumnos, de su dominio de la disciplina que imparten y, del repertorio de estrategias de enseñanza que poseen para ofrecer un nivel alto y un currículum estimulante. Finalmente, los profesores necesitan que el programa se desarrolle de forma continuada, sólida, coherente y centrada en las personas implicadas, y que ofrezca un apoyo adecuado a la aplicación basada en las necesidades de los alumnos.

Por último, los programas de éxito parten de una formación muy cuidada del personal de la escuela, y cuentan con un director administrativo, claramente definido, que posee aptitudes para el desarrollo de programas, conocimiento de los momentos más adecuados que requieren el uso de estas aptitudes, y de los recursos idóneos para las tareas instruccionales a las que se atiende.

La última variable incluida en la categoría de aplicación del programa es la evaluación, y apunto sugerencias también para los evaluadores. La evaluación abarca desde la identificación y la implicación de aquellos individuos sobre los que el programa ejerce su mayor impacto, a la consideración tanto de los documentos como de la práctica del programa, de forma que se maximiza el efecto de la evaluación del proceso.

Palabras clave: Evaluación de programas, Filosofía y definición, Identificación, Currículum, Evaluación, Profesores, Dirección.

ABSTRACT

Lessons learned from evaluating programs for the gifted: Promising practices and practical pitfalls

The world of gifted education is often guided by good theory and research, but sometimes we are not aware of some of the practical advice that can be derived from the evaluations of other programs for gifted ad talented students. In this article, I have used my experiences as a program evaluator in identifying both the strengths and weaknesses of programs to suggest common areas of weaknesses in these programs recommend basic practices that have contributed to the success of gifted programs. The recommendations for administrators and teachers are organized around five categories which were first suggested by Renzulli (1975): program philosophy and definition, student identification and placement, the curriculum, teacher selection and training, and program organization and operation. The basic premise for all high quality programming stems from a sound definition of giftedness and a philosophy for serving gifted students that is consistent with the definition and which is based on principles that are in accord with other educational philosophies of the school. In addition, the philosophy of providing services should be aligned with the needs of the gifted student that are suggested by the definition that has been adopted. When careful consideration is given to this aspect of program development, there is increased likelihood that other components will also be high quality. Naturally student identification and placement should be an outgrowth of the definition of giftedness. Further, placement should be according to the needs of the students, not on the basis of fitting all gifted students to one programming arrangement and one curricular offering.

It is also important that curriculum be based on the characteristics of the identified students. One of the major shortcomings in curricular options for gifted students is failure to provide a curriculum that both satisfies Passow criteria (1982), that this curriculum should be curriculum that other students could not do, should not do, and would not do. In addition, the curriculum should be based on sound developmental principles, should reflect attention to increasing complexity, abstractness, pace, openness, independence, insight and transfer, and sophisticated levels of resource use. Further, program offerings should provide opportunities for appropriate cognitive, social and emotional development of gifted students. The dimension of curriculum associated with assessment must also be modified for gifted students to ensure they are learning to strive for excellence in the absolute sense rather than relative to peers and that they are learning to create products reflective of the practitioners and researchers in the disciplines.

The aspects of teacher selection and training are based on both skill and attitude toward teaching the gifted. Teachers should be selected because they have a knowledge of the characteristics and needs of gifted students, because they have a sound knowledge of the discipline(s) they teach, and because they have the repertoire of teaching strategies to deliver a high level and engaging curriculum. Finally, teachers need a continuing, sound, coherent and focused staff development program that provides coherent support in delivering a program focused on the needs of the students.

Finally, successful programs are based on careful education of the general staff of the school, on a clearly delineated administrative leader with skills in program development and the time to apply those skills, and on adequate resources for the instructional tasks at hand.

The last variable which is included in the category of program operation is evaluation, and I offer suggestions for the evaluator as well. These range from identification and involvement of the individuals who are most impacted by the program, of evaluation of both the documents and the practice of the program, and for maximizing the impact of the evaluation process.