

Do Programs for 'Gifted' Kids Leave Other Students Behind? /
Schools may fail to reach those who are just above average.
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AMONG THIS summer's teen movie fare is "Mystery Men," which is about a band of super-hero wannabes with rather unusual powers. They include a character who uses flatulence as a weapon -and who will probably emerge as the favorite of junior-high school age kids this fall. While it's safe to say that the movie isn't a contender for an Academy Award, it does raise a significant question: What does it mean to be gifted? The designation "gifted" is arbitrary. Albert Einstein and Thomas Edison were considered slow learners. Many child prodigies have had unhappy lives and unsuccessful careers. I don't think it is an accident that children from the most affluent families in a community tend to predominate in its public schools' "gifted classes." What school districts may actually be doing is selecting children who have had the most advantages at home and providing them with the most advantages at school. Families who move from middle-class districts to more affluent communities often discover that their children are no longer considered "gifted." For a youngster, this can be traumatic.

Segregating students based on academic performance also reinforces stereotypes. For some children, it encourages their sense of entitlement, that they are better than other people and should get more from life. Other children worry they will lose their friends or that they will be thrown out of the select group if they ever make a mistake. Meanwhile, children left behind in the drill-and-skill classes get the message that they are academic losers. Many may give up trying to learn, setting the stage for failure in life.

Another problem is the wide variety of programs claiming to serve the needs of "gifted" children. New York City students in "gifted" classes are generally from middle-class families that constitute a diminishing percentage of the public-school population. These children, who are from all racial and ethnic backgrounds, are segregated into special classes and magnet schools that receive extra resources. These so-called gifted classes function as oases in a troubled school system -the only places where children receive a sound education.

These gifted programs are not created for students because they have special academic needs; these programs are the result of a political decision. New York City does not want middle-class families to abandon the public schools or move away. In Suffolk County, Amityville's creation of separate "gifted" classes has been criticized for similar reasons.

On Long Island, most elementary school "gifted" programs are pull-out programs, which means that children who are designated as "gifted" are "pulled out" of their regular classes for special enrichment. Without enrichment, parents and school officials claim, the "gifted" children will be bored in school and their performance will suffer.

Pull-out programs generally employ a project approach to teaching that encourages kids, working individually and in groups, to explore computers, science, literature and history. The reality is that this type of teaching could benefit every child by making learning exciting. Educational researchers have repeatedly demonstrated that, given sufficient teacher support, this method can succeed in groups of students with varying abilities. While repeated drilling of students who are having difficulty in the basics has a long history of failing to improve their performance, stimulating them to want to learn through enrichment programs has the potential to change their attitude toward learning and their performance in school.

In East Williston, every elementary school class meets with an enrichment teacher on a regular basis. Lawrence is discussing a program based on a special education inclusion model. Specialists would work with "gifted" children and their classmates in a regular school setting, providing attention and enrichment for everyone. These approaches merit careful consideration.

Too often middle school and high school students feel pressured to be chosen for selective programs with limited enrollments because their parents see these honors classes as an entry into elite colleges. Instead of learning how to learn, to enjoy learning, and how to work socially with groups of diverse people, teenagers learn to compete for limited rewards. This leaves them ill-prepared for a world where they will need to work cooperatively with people from many different backgrounds. In addition, pressure to get into advanced classes and the hierarchies these programs produce contribute to the stress and social division that have exploded into violence in schools around the country. In Japan, the intense pressure to excel has led to a high suicide rate among young adolescents, which is a worry in the United States as well.

The irony is that students are often poorly served by the advanced classes. Many use AP credits to earn exemptions from subjects instead of using them to qualify for elective courses in these subject areas. As a result, they can go through college without ever taking a history or a science class. Because of this, Ivy League colleges do not automatically grant AP course exemptions. They want students to take college-level courses in a broad range of subject areas as part of a college learning community.

If anything, "Mystery Men" shows that the question of who is "gifted" is in the eye of the beholder. Unfortunately, in most cases, the primary qualification for being considered "gifted" is having parents who are educated and know how to play the system.

What kind of society do we have when the students most likely to have a computer at home are also the ones most likely to have access to one in school? Does being considered gifted simply mean you come from an affluent family that can provide you with more of the "gifts"?