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ABSTRACT

The central premise underlying gifted education is that gifted students can and should be distinguished or differentiated from the larger, non-gifted population, and once identified, should receive specialized services. This paradigm is strongly rooted in the psychometric tradition and draws upon the "medical model" by defining characteristics or "symptoms" of giftedness and developing quantitative indices to precisely identify those students with that "condition." The current paradigm is inadequate in three areas: (1) dimensions of ability are not fixed and predetermined in any person over time and circumstances, and cannot be predicted comprehensively by traditional intelligence tests; (2) identification practices are arbitrary and contrived; and (3) a single, fixed program is provided for gifted students, relying on a resource room model and thus not offering opportunities for all students to learn and apply powerful learning and thinking tools. The traditional paradigm needs to give way to a broader, dynamic, growth-oriented view of the nature of giftedness. Identification should become more flexible, inclusive, and instruction-oriented. Schools should consider a broad range of instructional responses, designed to challenge all students to a greater degree. Implications of the new paradigm for research are outlined. (JDD)

Programming for Giftedness: Reexamining the Paradigm*

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For more than three decades, American educational practitioners and scholars have had a love-hate relationship with gifted education. We have not always seemed certain whether gifted education represented a compelling matter of insuring instructional equity, or a manifestation and propagation, however subtle, of an exclusive and undesirable educational caste system. We have experienced advocacy based on pleas for nurturing the "best and brightest" minds; exhortations that the potential world leaders of tomorrow demand our best efforts; and calls (some plaintive and others strident) for school programs to serve our most capable students, rescuing them from the grasp of an educational system perceived as committed to mediocrity. At the same time, there has been opposition to gifted education in which allegations have been made with strong language: elitism, offering some students "special privileges," creating special opportunities for a few students in "undemocratic" methods. We have seen clearly that, for every proposal, there is an equal and opposite counter-proposal.

Throughout this period, however, both advocates and adversaries have generally accepted a common view of the nature and fundamental conceptions which underlie "gifted education." Even though there has been disagreement regarding a number of specifics (e.g., whether or not giftedness is well-represented by IQ scores), I believe there has been consenus regarding the basic questions with which gifted education is concerned, to the degree that we can describe (in Kuhn's [1970] sense of the term) a paradigm that characterizes gifted education.

The central premise underlying this well-established paradigm and guiding both scholarly efforts and practical applications is:

> A group of individuals, called "gifted students," can and should be distinguished or differentiated from the larger, "non-gifted" population; once identified, this group should receive specialized services.

* A presentation in the Symposium, "Research Bases for Four Program Models for the Gifted," John F. Feldhusen, Chairperson; 96th Annual Convention of the American Psychological Association, Atlanta, Georgia, August 13, 1988.

Structure of the Current Paradigm

This paradigm seems rather strongly rooted in the psychometric tradition, drawing primarily on ability and achievement measures as the primary criteria for identifying "the gifted student." In addition, another root system of the paradigm appears to be the so-called "medical" model which I have sometimes heard associated with the Special Education tradition in the United States. This dimension of the paradigm asks that we consider "being gifted" as demonstrating a particular, well-defined set of characteristics or "symptoms." The goal is to determine the student's status with respect to the "condition" —seeking to determine (the earlier the better) if the student is gifted or not. This has led us to emphasize that the purpose of identification is selection of only those students who "really" demonstrate the condition. Taken together, these dimensions have established a paradigm under which "being gifted" is a fixed condition demonstrated only a small percentage of students. The goal of identification is to locate those who "have the condition," while excluding those who do not. Improvements in identification are viewed as techniques or strategies which allow for more precise designations (in or out; gifted, highly gifted, or even "severely and profoundly" gifted) and more specific quantitative indices or cutoff scores. Once a student has been identified as gifted, the next step of the paradigm is "placement" in the gifted program, a special instructional opportunity presumably commensurate with the characteristics and needs of "the gifted." Much emphasis has been placed on the articulation of "principles of a differentiated curriculum," and on developing a carefully-defined, well-structured gifted curriculum plan.

Concerns With the Current Paradigm

The current paradigm is seriously inadequate, I believe, in many important respects. Let us consider three major areas of concern: the nature of giftedness, the nature of identification, and the nature of the response we call "gifted programs."

The Nature of Giftedness.

The traditional paradigm proposes that giftedness is a category or classification dimension, fixed and defined by specific criteria— a status which one holds by virtue of one's standing in those important criteria. There are numerous limitations in this view, I believe; among them:

• It is evident from research that many of the cognitive (e.g., memory, critical and creative thinking, problem solving, inferences and deuctions, analogies, and decision-making) and affective skills (e.g., motivation, persistence, confidence, task attention, and metacognitive skills) traditionally associated with "intelligence" can be nurtured through direct instructional intervention. The dimensions of ability emphasized in defining who is (and also who is not) gifted are thus not best viewed as fixed and predetermined, absolutely "present" or "absent" in any person over time and circumstances.

• It is also readily evident that creatively productive accomplishments by individuals, over

an extended period of time in real life, are neither predicted very comprehensively by traditional IQ or achievement indices used in orthodox Gifted Education, nor controlled exclusively by the people and circumstances of the school experience.

The traditional paradigm needs to give way, then, to a broader, more complex, dynamic, and growth-oriented view of the nature of giftedness. The general nature of the proposed shift for this paradigm is illustrated in Figure One.

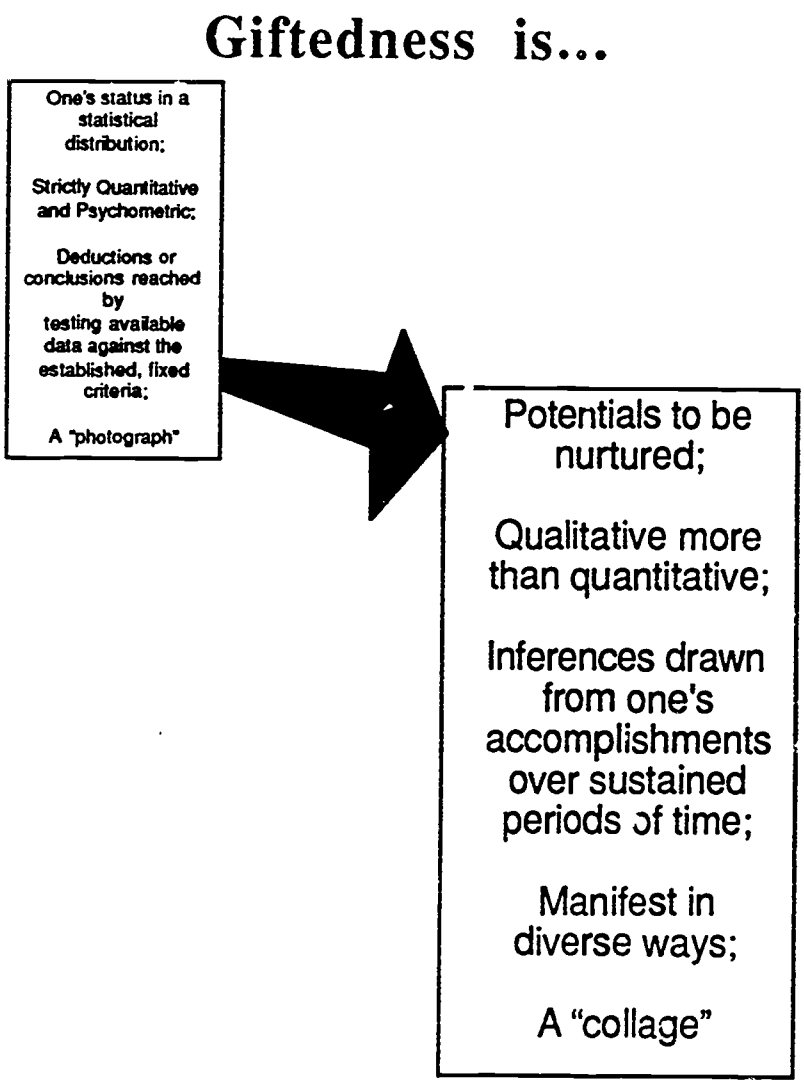

Figure One: Dimensions of A New Paradigm:
Expanding Our Conception of Giftedness

Identification: Purposes and Methods

If, in fact, the paradigm for understanding the nature of "giftedness" begins to change, a closely-related shift must also occur in relation to "identification."

•Present practices are arbitrary and contrived. Even when other indicators are considered, in an effort to follow the commonly-heard plea for "multiple selection criteria," the additional indicators tend to be items which correlate better with IQ or achievement scores than with anything else, thus adding very little that is original or unique to the screening process, or indicators that are so dubious in validity or reliability that it cannot be asserted with any confidence that they are really measures of anything. It is very common practice for all the available data to be "tortured until it confesses," thus enabling us to obtain a single score by which the student can be declared gifted or not, so he or she can then be included or excluded from the school's program. A common tactic for accomplishing these analyses is to use a matrix, in which interval data are reduced to ordinal, assigning "points" for test scores that fall into preset intervals (i.e., if your IQ is 140+, you get 5 points, but if it is "only" 130-139, you get just four points, and so on...). The logical and statistical deficiencies of this tactic are numerous, and have been specifically identified in the literature (Feldhusen, Baska, and Womble, 1981). Nonetheless, the tactic remains popular, and the number of students who have been victimized by it is difficult to determine with precision, but probably quite high. Coordinators and program administrators grasp eagerly any straw which appears to promise simple formulas which produce specific numbers to use in "explaining" selection decisions to students, parents, or staff.

•Contemporary understandings of the nature and diversity of human talents, and on the individual nature of students' learning styles or preferences, suggest that identification should focus more on the needs of students, to enable us to plan appropriate instruction, than merely an effort to categorize or label the student.

The needed paradigm shift, then, seems to be in the direction of more flexible, inclusive, and instructionally-oriented conceptions and away from using identification simply to include or exclude students from a particular category. The proposed shift is illustrated in Figure Two.

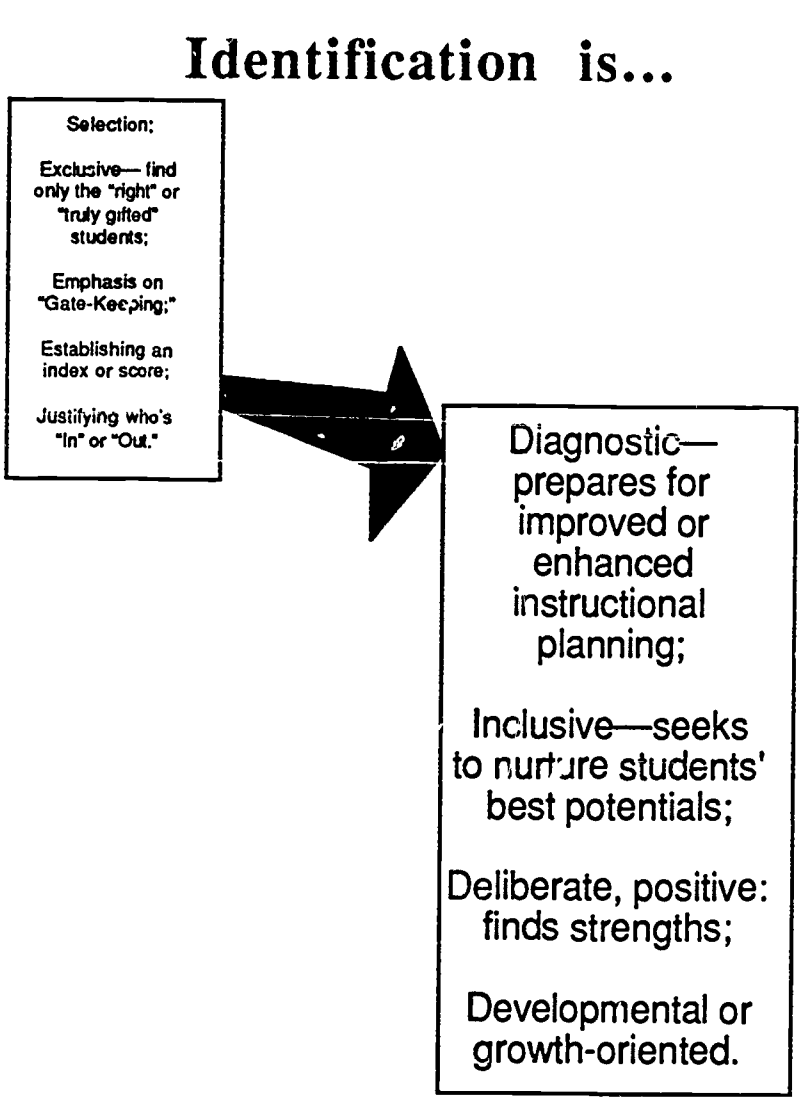

Figure Two:
New Directions for Identification

Understanding the Response: Gifted Programming

The third major dimension of the shifting paradigm deals with programming— the instructional response to the changes taking place in defining giftedness and identification.

•Present practices rely almost exclusively on providing a single, fixed program to all "gifted students." It is most common for the school to preplan a single program which will be offered to all students identified for the program, on the premise that the needs of "the gifted" are homogeneous and thus can be readily defined and met. Students whose strengths, talents, or interests vary too widely from the anticipated characteristics and needs are removed from programs (often either by being determined not to be gifted after all, or by being defined as members of a category not served by the existing program, such as in the frequent explanation, "Our program serves only the academically gifted student").

•Present practices also rely almost entirely on a "pull out, resource room" model for delivering services, in which the designated students are sent to "the gifted teacher" at a designated daily time (or weekly, or often an even less frequent interval), to partake of the gifted activities. There is, in truth, very little specific consideration of the individual needs of the students, and the so-called "differentiated curriculum" quite often consists of activities which can and should be provided for all students in a strong, contemporary regular school program. Most lists of principles of the "differentiated curriculum" describe goals and strategies which seem to be generally desirable for virtually all students.

•Separating the "gifted program" from the larger context of the school's total instructional program offers some teachers a means for justifying lack of any concern or involvement in individualization or making daily instruction more thoughtful and challenging: the gifted teacher takes care of that.

•Present practices frequently overlook the powerful learning and thinking tools which can be learned and applied successfully by all students, through which many students can be empowered or enabled to become more successful and more creatively productive than would have been predicted on the basis of test scores or prior achievement. We have at our disposal today more information than ever before about powerful "tools" and processes for creative and critical thinking, problem solving, and decision-making— tools which can help students to rise above the boundaries created by arbitrary categorizations. We also have more knowledge than ever before about individualized teaching, as well as more and more powerful technology at our disposal. It is entirely possible that, give time and comptent instruction, many more students will be able to function at higher levels than is envisioned by the dimensions of any traditional gifted programs. We can be "prospectors for potentials" rather than merely "gatekeepers," and we have the opportunity to help students to become more than we thought they were capable of being!

Thus, the paradigm shift that I believe is called for would challenge schools to consider a broad range of instructional responses or services, designed to challenge all students to a greater degree and to provide many students with new opportunities for higher level challenges and opportunities in areas of their own greatest potentials and interests. Instead of an emphasis on "programs for the gifted," I believe we need more diverse and varied "programming for giftedness." Some of the dimensions of the proposed shift in our view of programming are illustrated in Figure Three.

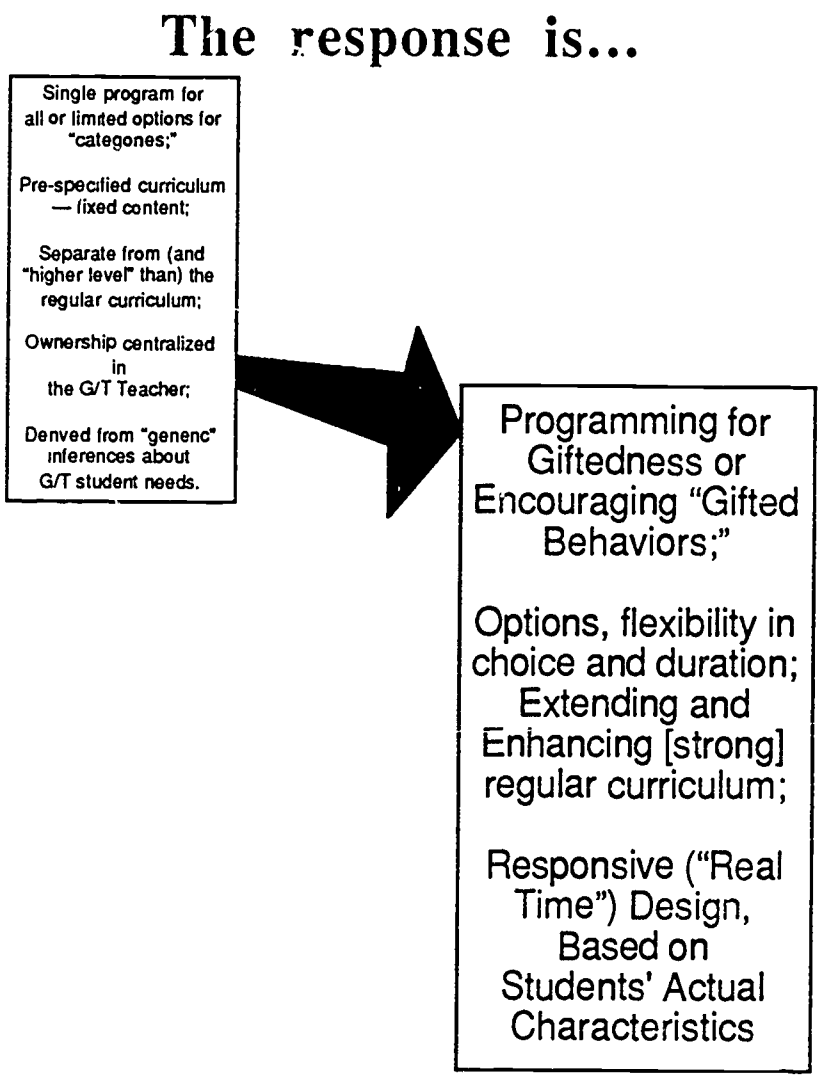

Figure Three:
New Directions for Gifted Programming

Implications of the New Paradigm for Research

Unfortunately, it is not very easy to describe the implications of the emerging new paradigm for research, at least in relation to the familiar "experimental versus control, pre-post test" kinds of designs that most of us studied our Campbell and Stanley so diligently to learn. The new paradigm does not present us with an easily-defined, unidimensional "treatment" that can be applied with precision and careful control to a specific sample. The new paradigm requires that we look to scholarship from many different subject areas and topics simply to begin understanding its nature and scope. I have attempted to illustrate the broad and varied foundations for the new paradigm in Figure Four; I confess that I am not nearly sufficiently imaginative as an experimenter to begin to design studies in which these are well-defined, well-controlled, systematically manipulated, and easily operationalized for large groups of students randomly assigned to experimental conditions.

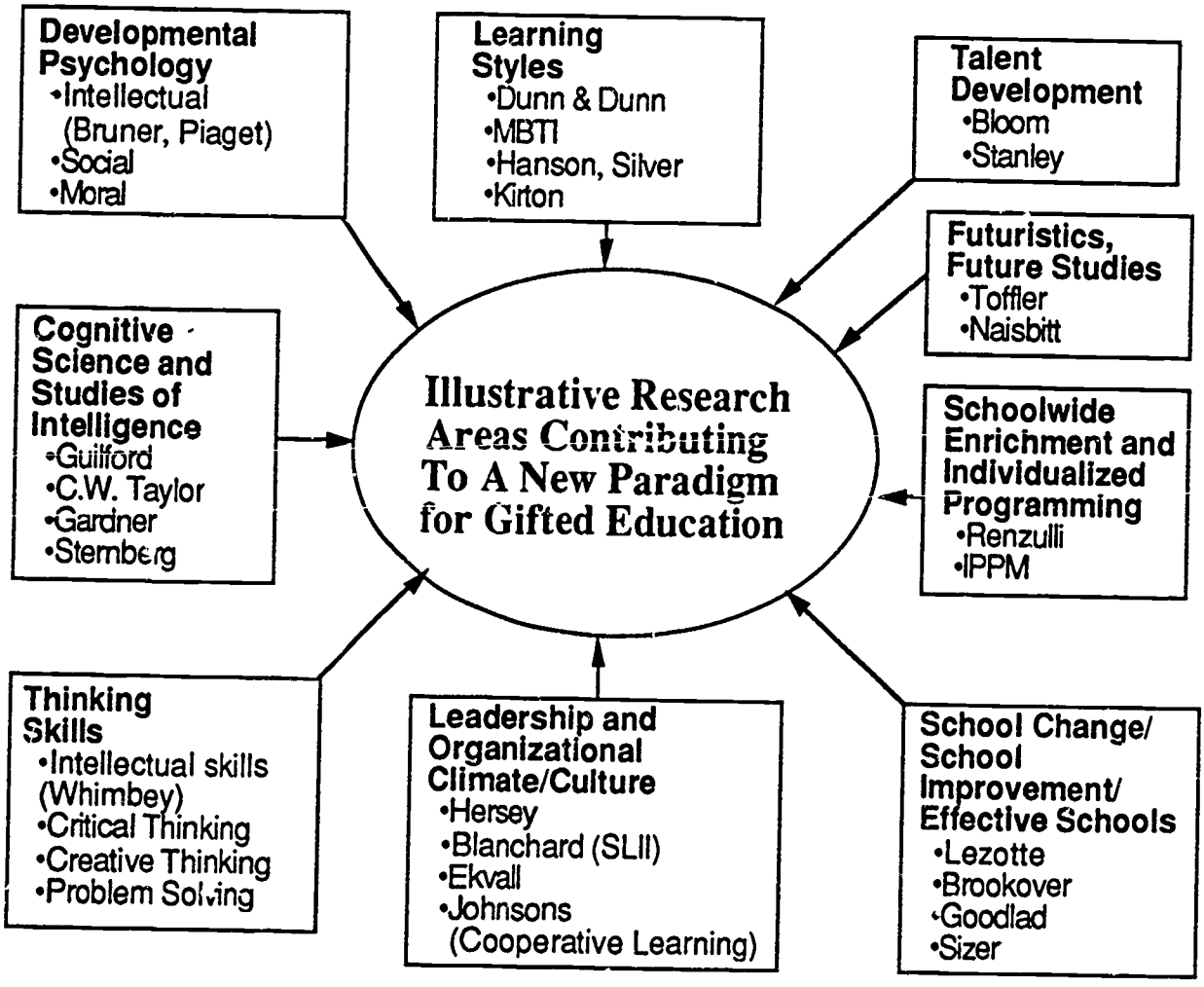

Figure Four:
Illustrative Dimensions of Research Contributing To A New Paradigm

It seems likely to me that the research needs of the field can be broadly characterized in these concerns:

•Studies of program effectiveness will require varied documentation of several higher level skills and more complex student products and accomplishments, rather than merely end-of-year comparisons of basic standardized achievement data.

•Since these complex outcomes may require longer periods of time to be manifest, we must plan for long-term investigations rather than seeking only immediate indicators of impact.

•Complex outcomes are also likely to take many forms of expression, so it seems important to investigate their attainment through the perspectives of many different data sources and disciplines.

•Programming must be described through much more complex processes, perhaps through such means as extended case studies, ethnographic studies, school audit methods, or other more qualitative approaches, rather than through characterizations of collections of content or activities as though they comprised a well-defined treatment or program.

•Complex multivariate models will surely be required to investigate multiple factors which contribute differentially to the accomplishments and productivity of various individuals and groups; we cannot think in terms of simple correlational studies. Rather than simply using single measures, such as IQ scores, to characterize research subjects as "gifted" or "not gifted" subjects, it will also be much more important to design studies in which we investigate differential effects or consequences of programming experiences in relation to multiple sets of student characteristics.

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