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Including the excluded:

Educating teachers to teach gifted and talented children

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My aim is to present the discussions we had at Beit Berl College this year, when I brought before the Academic Council a proposal to open at the College a new program of studies for the B.Ed. – a program for training teachers to work with gifted and talented children.

The term "gifted children" has many meanings, and often alternate terms are used in order to speak about them: gifted, talented, genius, children with high intelligence, high achievement, and distinction.

Official definitions usually rely on IQ tests and other ways to measure creativity and motivation. Roughly, gifted children form about 1%-3% of school population of every class; high achievers (or excellent students) form the top 5% of the student population for every age group.

The following table shows the number and percentage of students who are high achievers from a total population of 100,000 students.

IQ	Incidence for 100,000 school students	% of total student population
120	10,000	10
125	5,000	5
130	2,500	2.5
135	1,000	1
140	400	0.4
145	100	0.1
160	10	0.001

These data show that almost 20% (19% to be precise) of the student population has a potential for high achievement, excellence and talent.

For a long time now, Public educational systems have proclaimed their commitment to the advancement of all children according to their talents. The practical meaning of this attitude is a huge investment in "special education". Policy makers in education have worried mostly about the kids at the bottom, who are underachievers because of learning disabilities, or handicaps or social circumstances.

But what about the other end of the spectrum – the high achievers, the gifted and the talented? It seems that public educational systems have little idea how to cultivate their most promising students. In a recent article about this issue, Time Magazine asserted that the American concept of "no child left behind" suggests that it is more important for schools to identify deficiencies than to cultivate gifts. The social impulse behind the "no child left behind" act is radically egalitarian. It has forced schools to subsidize the education of the least gifted.

According to Time Magazine, American schools spend more than \$8 billion a year educating the mentally retarded. Spending on the gifted in the US is no more than \$800 million. But does it make sense to spend 10 times as much to try to bring low achieving students to mere proficiency than to nurture those with the greatest potential. "We may", concludes Time Magazine, "be squandering a national resource: our best young minds."

I don't have precise data for Israel, but it seems to me the situation is the same. The Israeli State educational system has been concerned especially with children with special needs, and we are all aware of numerous programs for them (some to be discussed in this Symposium). As you know the dominant idea in the past few years has been to integrate children with special needs (if they can) into regular classrooms, and not to separate them from their peers.

The high achievers and talented have usually been neglected not only by educational authorities. Popular opinion has it that these children can get along by themselves. Schoolwork is easy for them, and they do not need any support.

Yet surprisingly, research shows that gifted students drop out of school at the same rates as non-gifted kids – about 5% of both populations leave school early. In fact high achievers are often socially excluded within their classrooms. Their boredom with regular school work and their intense motivation to be accepted by their peers makes them emotionally vulnerable and often leads them to be involved in disciplinary problems at school and at home.

So we take for granted that those with IQs below the mean (55 or lower on IQ tests) require "special" education. But students with IQs above the mean (145 or higher) often have just as much trouble interacting with average kids and learning at an average pace. Shouldn't we do something for them as well? Are we not losing our most important intellectual resource? And if we want to enable them to accomplish all they can, should we not prepare teachers to work with this population?

With these ideas in mind, I set out last year to design a program of studies in order to train teachers for working with high achievers. Having located a specialist in this field, my general guidelines have been to write a curriculum which will emphasize that graduates of this program should be able to work at regular schools, that is to say, not in special classes for the high achievers and the gifted.

In Israel there are no full academic programs to train teachers to work with gifted children or with high achievers, but only partial courses, usually within the framework of in-service training. Yet every teacher, in every classroom of regular schools, has high achievers. Therefore, just as it is essential to expose teachers to work with learning disabled children, it is important to teach them to work with high achieving and talented students. In a sense, then, a curriculum for training teachers to deal with giftedness is similar – or has the same logic – as special education curricula, which have existed for many years at colleges and universities.

Such a program would not only open a unique department in an Israeli academic institution, but it would also broaden the scope of the Ministry of Education's projects for gifted children, which mostly concentrate on one day a week of enrichment (outside their regular classrooms), or other programs of this kind.

For Beit Berl College, it was important for its identification with excellence, but most importantly, the program we suggested was supposed to be a common department for the School of Education and the Arab Institute at Beit Berl. That was a unique experience for us, which at first we did not take into account, but which gradually became a seriously important aspect and brought together faculty members from both schools in order to write a common program.

I do not want to present here the components of the program, since this is a field outside my professional expertise. My intention is to discuss the politics of adopting the new curriculum – a very lengthy process which must have the final approval of the College's Academic Council.

From Academic Council Protocols

Opposition:

The chairman of the Council:

- Should Beit Berl College develop programs for strong and elitist populations?
- Gifted children are a strong population...is the College on the road to that sector?
- I suggest not hurrying and giving full time for discussion.

And indeed – full time was given (3 full meetings of the Council).

Members of the Council:

- Isn't the development of such a curriculum contrary to the College's ethos?
- This proposal is against the basic Israeli ethos.
- Will the proposed program not encourage the existing gender gap between boys and girls, and between populations of oriental and European origins?
- We have a complicated social issue. It's not a psychological problem.
- I object to this program. Every classroom has high achievers. Therefore we should train every teacher to teach excellent students. But that is not the intention of this curriculum. This curriculum provides a foundation for special

classes or special schools. The program is too psychologically oriented, treating the gifted as if they need special care. It deals exclusively with cognitive psychology and does not answer the needs of high achievers and gifted children. Too much therapy.

- I'm worried about the social cost. Gifted children are not deprived children. It is necessary to emphasize the social role of the program.

Support

- For a decade the College has not developed new programs for the first degree. We have a chance to propose an original curriculum, which is needed in the field. The curriculum is designed to answer an actual need – there are excellent and gifted students in every classroom, and they do not receive appropriate treatment. The developers of this program did not see special schools for the gifted, and did not intend to support a narrow social elite. They did not want to propose a program which will distance them from Israeli society. They sought to suggest a curriculum which will take care of the special needs of high achievers, and would be appropriate for any school anywhere.
- There is social criticism, but let us not forget the emotional and psychological problem of these children.
- I support the program ideologically. It does not imply an action against weak populations and does not neglect social justice. As educators we have to remember that apart from weak populations the world emphasizes excellence. We must not evade this. This population needs care and cultivation.
- I believe it's an important perspective [on education]. There are reasons why we did not deal with it for 30 years, and it's about time to begin. [Israeli] society was based on the collective... equality is reached by constructing an entire system to encourage the weak child, in order to provide him with a fair [equal] chance. It is [now] necessary to encourage excellence. This is not a leadership issue but a [general] social issue. An appropriate relationship within the classroom to children who are different – respect to the good student expresses respect of knowledge. This is an issue of individualism versus collectivism. I support a program which will develop sensitivity to individualism within the classroom.

Summary

The discussion about gifted and talented children shows that even pedagogues tend to see only one side of the issue. Even though the program was approved at the end of the Council's discussions, many members of the council still believe that all efforts should be invested in disabled children (and preparing teachers for them) rather than in talented children and their teachers.

It is worthwhile to remark, in closing, that even though the program for training teachers for gifted children was sent to the Ministry of Education in April 2007, to date (November 2007) we did not receive any comment or reaction from the Ministry. This is inductive of the entire situation.