

The future of educational options for gifted kids.

Greg Moody

Preface

While the question is “What I see as the future of educational options for gifted kids?”. I see two quite different possible categories of answer” 1) What do I think it will be? (the way things are going right now - the cynical answer) and 2) what do I think it ought to be? (the optimal answer). Since I have hope that we can change the world, I will stick with number 2.

I have a lot of personal opinions about the way education should be handled in general – not just for gifted kids. I know there are a lot of arguments going on about whether giftedness is inherited or environmental (including some discussion in the class group). My thoughts are that it doesn’t really matter – that we ought to concentrate on 1) where the child is and 2) what we (educators, parents, governments, etc.) ought to do to help them grow. To argue that heredity is the most important factor can be self-defeating because it implies that our educational choices have little impact – therefore its not an important consideration (unless it is the only factor – which obviously isn’t true). Second, I understand the four pronged model in our book (learner-centered, assessment-centered, knowledge-centered, and community-centered) and I think it is almost an adequate model. If I may, from my own experience, add that I think there needs to be a value-centered component. At first this sounds inappropriate – especially from me who was trained as a counselor (we’re supposed to keep our own values out of counseling). I think (or is it my value system), however that there are some critical items that we must develop in interactions with children (for example: work ethic, embracing diversity and simple basic values like don’t steal, don’t hit people, etc.). If some think these things are inappropriate in school – well, I will go ahead and argue with them. Some might argue that the community-centered perspective takes care of this, but if so, it wasn’t clear to me. Why should we hide from these types of lessons – they may be more important than the rest of students’ education and more importantly for this discussion – I feel they are crucial for learning. Finally I think the focus here should be on how to deliver the proper education to the gifted student as opposed to making sure they are in a gifted classroom. I do not think that gifted/non-gifted is a discrete state of a person. Clearly there is a continuum of intelligence and solutions should acknowledge this.

With this out of the way, I guess I can go on...

What do I see as the future of educational options for gifted kids

The “How People Learn” book is a good summary of how to create tactics within an educational system. In it we can start to understand how to instruct, how to evaluate and how to design educational systems. It doesn’t suggest a specific model for education (we are left to do this). I would like to suggest a few general themes that may suggest a specific model. There are three areas I would like to address: use of assessment, instruction delivery, flexibility in methods, and computer aided learning.

Assessment

First, the assessment system we use must be consistent with the most modern methods (like in our book). Here we would need not only to identify children with giftedness, but also be able to identify areas of giftedness that are based on what are accepted as educational goals. For example measuring ability to speak in public is nice, but not an educational goal. At the same time, teachers should be trained on how to use these as a tool, not a measure of their success. The assessment is useless unless it is used to identify areas of past success and future focus.

Instruction Delivery

Next, I would envision a more fluid approach to delivering instruction. In other words, much of the material that would be appropriate for kids is already in the schools. If a child is strong in math and weak in reading, there would be easy delivery options. There are many ways people have tried to handle this – team teaching, classrooms without walls, etc. I think, however, that the particular method is not as important as commitment to the method, and to the above assessment and planning. One method I might suggest (that I am sort of stealing from martial arts) is that there is a defined continuum of ability within each educational area (reading, math, or however we decide to define it – again I think commitment here is more important than the specific educational areas). Then each student carries some indicator about their status in each of these areas. For example, the areas could be:

- ☐ Math
- ☐ Reading
- ☐ Social Studies
- ☐ P.E.
- ☐ Art
- ☐

And the definition of the continuum would be:

- ☐ Level 1 (weakest) Orange
- ☐ Level 2 Yellow
- ☐ Level 3 Green
- ☐ Level 4 Purple
- ☐ Level 5 Blue
- ☐ Level 6 Brown
- ☐ Level 7 Red
- ☐ Level 8 (Strongest) Gold

Students then would attend the class appropriate for their color. For example a student might be :

- ☐ Math Level 4 (Purple)
- ☐ Reading Level 3 (Green)
- ☐ Social Studies Level 2 (Yellow)
- ☐ P.E. Level 8 (Gold)
- ☐ Art Level 4 (Purple)

Then they would attend the Purple math class, the Green reading class, etc.. Note that nowhere here is there an age listed. They can also change categories at any time there is an assessment performed (which could be done at any time). This would be a significant advantage if a child was misplaced, they would be evaluated regularly and properly placed in short order (not at the end of the semester or year when they are totally overwhelmed or totally bored. Considerations here might be:

Consideration	Comments
that kids would be with older or younger kids	I don't think this has been shown to be a problem. They will have the subject in common. Some classes could still be age oriented.
It would hurt kids self-esteem if their buddies are attending the gold class and they are in the orange class	No different from now. In fact maybe some kids would be motivated to be in the higher groups.
We would have to have a rotating class schedule like high school – even at the elementary level	Not necessarily, they could have some all group classes, and some separate (for example, P.E. could be group and the colors would indicate how to distribute teams)
High schools offer more variety of subjects, this would be a lot of areas.	There would be some core areas (math, english, etc.) and then for example you may have to be in the Blue math class to take physics. They could be independent but inter-related.
People aren't used to it – too weird	This is true of any radical idea – doesn't mean it's the wrong thing to do.
Requires too many classes	See below
Would require large schools to implement because there would have to be enough kids in each level to have a class (i.e. if there were only one kid in Level 2, it would be hard to have a teacher for that one kid)	Same problem we have today. In small schools, it is hard to have extensive special classes.

The class distribution would be different from what we are used to today. For a large school (910 kids in the example) *levels* might be distributed as follows (similar to an octal distribution, but with more kids in the middle classes because they are at the same level, and less kids in the lower classes because they would possibly have learning disabilities):

Class Level	Qty	Teachers
Level 1	10	2
Level 2	40	2
Level 3	150	8
Level 4	300	16
Level 5	300	16
Level 6	150	8
Level 7	40	2
Level 8	20	1

This would require 55 teachers available each class (about 20 kids per teacher – if the student instructor ration was higher like in some schools, then you would require less teachers). So you can see that this system would not require more teachers – rather the same).

Instruction Methods

Third, I feel that gifted kids (really all kids) need more flexibility in the type of instruction (Learner-centered). This would be more available through 1) teacher training and 2) ironically, commitment to educational goals within country so educational materials companies, universities and fellow teachers can more practically develop methods, materials, drills, fun activities and other ways to teach. Many educational problems today could be solved if there was more commitment from leaders at a high level. While one reason textbook companies develop for the median is that there is more sale potential, I think there is also the fact that it is hard to develop materials when the wind shifts so regularly in the educational field.

Computer Aided Learning

In the book “Ender’s Game” students all had “desks” which were really portable computers linked to a main system. They could play “games” that would take them to the next level of complexity as they overcame particular obstacles (sounds familiar). While computer assisted tools are still only starting to make an impact, continued use of computer-aided education can make a major impact for gifted kids. Now the computer could adapt dynamically and take the student to more complicated and challenging problems. This is very exciting because in the extreme case, the teacher would be the facilitator, and the student would have no limit on what they could learn. In the more real world, personal interactions and hands-on learning are very important as well, so I would not think that extreme would be the goal, but we can use it to expand the students available instruction options in a single learning environment.

Conclusion

In conclusion I think the solution for education of gifted kids is in being more flexible with delivery of instruction, flexibility of ability assessment, flexibility in actually taking classes and using computers as an additional aid in expanding learning options. My key word here is *flexibility*. I think gifted kids (all kids) need their education experience to adapt to their needs. Maybe this is an obvious point, but our current system doesn’t seem to be consistent

with this to a large degree. It is hard to change - our system has a long history. It was developed for good reasons by many caring people. The problem was that they didn't have the same information that we have today. Thomas Jefferson, one of the framers of our Constitution, felt that every few decades, "we should throw it [the Constitution] out and begin again". It is important that we use the information we have to take the next step, re-think the future and be brave enough to begin again.