

Guest Editorial

The winter 1982 issue of the *Gifted Child Quarterly* (Volume 26, Number 1) focused specifically on the challenge of “Demythologizing Gifted Education,” centering on the question, “What are the main issues that gifted education must confront effectively if it is to survive the 1980s?”

The issue arose from the perception that, more than a decade after the release of the widely discussed Marland report, many common myths (“practices or beliefs which we often discover upon close scrutiny to be more fanciful than truthful”) were persistently prevalent in gifted education. The goal of the special issue was to *demythologize* or help us reverse, or free ourselves from, those myths. As editor, I expressed three general hopes for the issue:

- Stimulate some lively discussion, critical thinking, and creative research
- Shake loose the grip of some common myths
- Suggest promising directions for more productive foundations for inquiry and practice

Context: Leading Up To the 1982 Myths

It may be helpful to look back at the context of American life and times, general education, and gifted education in the early 1980s that gave rise to the myths (and the responses to them).

The late 1970s and the times leading up to the 1982 issue were turbulent, unsettled times in American society. We had witnessed political turbulence in dealing with conflict in Vietnam and the antiwar movement and protests as well as the turmoil of Watergate and a presidential impeachment. We experienced great social unrest in the expansion of the Civil Rights movement and ongoing concerns for desegregation issues and the rise of the women’s movement. It was also a time of advances in science and technology, from space exploration programs to the emergence of personal and home computers and the rapid expansion of cell phone technology and access.

American education during these times mirrored the same turbulence and unrest. It was the era of school busing as a strategy for addressing the goal of

desegregating public schools throughout the country (and not just in the South), affirmative action programs, the extension of antiwar movements and protests on American college campuses, the impact of the women’s movement on teacher activism, and the impact of Title IX. We saw increasing concerns for equalization of school funding, addressing imbalances between spending of wealthier and poorer districts (and their concomitant impact on unequal educational opportunities for minority, urban, poor children). During this era, we also saw the rise and then the decline of “open education,” the emergence of Magnet Schools (to draw people back into urban schools), along with rising concerns about steadily declining test scores nationwide, throughout the decade.

In gifted education, 10 years beyond the publication of the Marland report and following the impact of Public Law 93-380 (which established, among other things, the National/State Leadership Training Institute on the Gifted/Talented) and Public Law 94-142 (which brought the acronym “IEP” into the vocabulary of gifted education, for example), many new program models and approaches flourished, and broader conceptions of giftedness and talent garnered increasing attention. Gifted education was sustained during this decade largely as a result of vigorous efforts by both individual and organizational advocates (including state and national organizations of parents and professionals and organizations such as the National Association for Gifted Children [NAGC] and the Council for Exceptional Children’s The Association for the Gifted). The development of expanded models of giftedness and gifted programs often outpaced their implementation in practice, however.

The confluence of these turbulent, dynamic forces—in society and education broadly and within gifted education—gave rise to the 15 myths we addressed in the winter 1982 special issue. Those myths were the following:

1. The gifted constitutes a single, homogeneous group.
2. The gifted constitutes 3% to 5% of the population.

3. Your sample must be the same as the population.
4. There must be “winners” and “losers” in identification and programming (also known as the Myth of the Sacred, Explainable Cutoff Score, or the Exclusion Fallacy).
5. We need to have the same scores for everyone.
6. Creativity is too difficult to measure.
7. The cosmetic use of multiple criteria, revolving around our quest for those who are *really* gifted.
8. One program, indivisible for all.
9. The Patch-On approach to services.
10. There is a single curriculum for the gifted.
11. The Ostrich syndrome (“Does gifted education cure sick regular programs?”).
12. Gifted education means having *a* program.
13. Programs should stick out like a sore thumb.
14. You have to do it alone!
15. Waiting for Santa Claus.

Since 1982: A Quarter Century of Continuing Change

I do not have actual statistics, but I have been told that the 1982 Myths issue was one of the most frequently requested of all back issues of the journal. Many colleagues reported (both prior to and during this update) that those myths are still being read and discussed in gifted education courses today.

However, the times have continued to be characterized by great change, in society as well as throughout education, and that gave us cause to wonder about the status of the myths today. Nearly a decade into a new century, and fully 25 years beyond that special issue, what is the current state of affairs in gifted education? Have we moved beyond the myths we sought to dispel in 1982? Have the myths changed, or have new ones replaced the earlier set? These were the kinds of questions that prompted us to reinstate the inquiry.

The 1980s unfolded as a decade of the “Me Generation” with its preoccupation with status, material acquisitions, and “shop till you drop” consumerism. Advances continued in science and technology as computers, cell phones, and other technological devices became more and more widespread throughout society. By the mid-1990s, we had entered the era of the Internet, with 3 million people online by 1994, an estimated 100 million by 1998, and approximately

1.5 billion at last accounting. Family structures changed dramatically: more divorces, increases in unmarried couples living together, more single parent families, increasing numbers of “two income families” (as women sought career opportunities *and* as pressures on income to meet costs grew). The 1980s began with double-digit inflation, and the 1990s were characterized not only by economic growth and low unemployment but also by increasing pressure on families (and increases in the numbers of the “working poor”). Social concerns grew around personal safety, rising crime, increasing violence, and the call for greater “civility” in public dialogue. Health care, Social Security reform, gun control, abortion, and gay rights have been issues that captured media attention and sparked ongoing dialogue and debate (and often conflict) in our society.

Rapid change and its consequences continued to be ever-present on the educational scene as well. In the 1980s, we witnessed growing conflict over “liberal” or “conservative” views of curriculum and teaching—for example, textbook selection, religious issues, school prayer, and teaching about “creationism” and evolution in science instruction. Education has also seen increasing tension in efforts to define and teach “the basics,” which have been, and continue to be, defined differently by various writers and groups. Some advocate for a return to an emphasis on classics and traditional “basic skills” in academic content areas. Others highlight the impact of technology, change, globalization, and problem solving in advocating for “new basics” or “21st-century skills.” Concerns have grown about quality and rigor in our curriculum, from 1983’s *A Nation at Risk* report to today’s emphasis on “No Child Left Behind,” high-stakes testing, and the standards movement. From the 1980s to today, educators have dealt with shifting emphases including “open education,” “direct instruction,” individualization, learning styles, and differentiation. A profusion of specific issues have confronted us including distance learning, year-round school, home schooling, school uniforms, single gender schools, school vouchers, Charter Schools, and privatization of K-12 education—despite the reality of operating in the context of mounting financial pressures and ongoing budget cuts.

Gifted education continued to ebb and flow, at the local, state, and national levels. After a period of decline at the federal level, the Jacob Javits Act was reinstated in 1987-1988 and then reauthorized in 1994 and subsequently (although it seemed to be in jeopardy almost annually). The Richardson Study

(1981-1983) and Pyramid Project report (1985), the establishment of the National Research Center in 1990, and the 1993 *National Excellence* report sustained a positive level of attention and interest on gifted education. From 1980 to 1990, state spending on Gifted/Talented was reported to have increased by tenfold, although subsequent budget pressures and financial difficulties in education have led to cut-backs and ongoing challenges in support for gifted programs at both the state and local levels. Beginning in the 1980s, our focus in gifted education appeared to shift from general advocacy and program development to emphasis on particular needs of racial, ethnic, and cultural subgroups (e.g., overcoming bias in assessment and participation, closing the achievement gap, dealing with underachievement, the needs of “twice exceptional” students, addressing challenges unique to either gender, and specific social and emotional concerns and needs). Gifted education also was influenced by the expanding national emphasis on challenging, rigorous curriculum in core academic areas and the need for expanding attention to curriculum and instruction in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics.

The Myths of Gifted Education: A Contemporary View

Against this backdrop of extensive and accelerating complexity and change, we sought to reexamine the 1982 myths. The NAGC conference in November 2007 included a panel (organized independently of our initiative) on myths and responses that informed a number of topics and issues. It suggested that many of the 1982 myths still persisted and also that some new ones have emerged. In preparing for this update, I conducted an informal (and unsystematic) poll of contemporary educators who had also been teaching in the early 1980s, asking them to assess the similarities and differences in their work then and now. Finally, we conducted a colloquium with faculty, graduate students, and area gifted program educators at the University of Virginia in October 2008.

Those sources provided the foundation for developing a contemporary list of myths. With only some small element of surprise, all 15 of the 1982 myths are still with us, although some have been modified in form or content over time (becoming more specific, identifying subissues or related concerns, or being refined or more “nuanced” with the benefit of

research and continuing experience in practice). In addition, several new myths emerged.

This provided an opportunity in several instances for the scholars who participated in the 1982 issue to review their original responses and to update, modify, or extend them. In some cases that was not possible, and so we identified new respondents (and, of course, that was true for the new myths, too), seeking active scholars in the field with demonstrated expertise in the topic. The 19 myths addressed in this issue, and the scholars who responded to each myth, are presented in the following list:

1. The gifted constitutes a single, homogeneous group (Dr. Sally Reis and Dr. Joseph Renzulli)
2. The gifted constitutes 3% to 5% of the population (Dr. James Borland)
3. A family of identification myths (Dr. Carolyn Callahan)
4. We need to have the same scores for everyone (Dr. Frank Worrell)
5. Creativity is too difficult to measure (Dr. Donald Treffinger)
6. The cosmetic use of multiple criteria (Dr. Reva Friedman-Nimz)
7. Differentiation in the regular classroom is equivalent to gifted programs and is sufficient (Dr. Holly Hertberg Davis)
8. The Patch-On approach to services (Dr. Carol Tomlinson)
9. There is a single curriculum for the gifted (Dr. Sandra Kaplan)
10. The Ostrich syndrome: Do gifted programs cure sick regular programs? (Dr. Ann Robinson)
11. Gifted education means having *a* program (Dr. Marcia Gentry)
12. Programs should stick out like a sore thumb (Dr. Joyce Van Tassel Baska)
13. You have to do it alone! (Dr. Dorothy Sisk)
14. Waiting for Santa Claus (Dr. Cheryll Adams)
15. High ability students don't face problems and challenges (Dr. Sidney Moon)
16. Confusing “difficulty” and high stakes testing with rigor (Dr. Tonya Moon)
17. Gifted students don't have unique social and/or emotional needs (Dr. Jean Peterson)
18. It's “fair” to teach all children the same way (Dr. Carolyn Cooper)
19. Advanced Placement (AP) is an adequate secondary program (Dr. Shelagh Gallagher)

The three purposes of the 1982 issue remain valid. Our hope is that this issue will stimulate lively discussion, critical thinking, and creative research in the field; help “shake loose the grip” of some common myths; and suggest promising directions for more productive foundations for inquiry and practice. The closing challenge stated in the 1982 issue also remains relevant today: “If we allow ourselves to challenge, question, and probe some of gifted education’s myths, we can develop new models and approaches that will be practical, cost-efficient, and readily implemented in the schools.” Finally, the same caution applies now as then: The issues and concerns raised by

the respondents to these myths will continue to be challenging to address. Our field needs a strong, broadly conceived, and effectively supported commitment to research and development, an ongoing commitment to professional development, sustained advocacy for sound practice, support from NAGC and other professional organizations, and perhaps most of all, the unwavering support and collaboration of parents, educators, administrators, policy makers, and researchers.

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