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Abstract

The approach proposed by Subotnik, Olszewski-Kubilius, and Worrell (2011) has significant implications for the field of gifted education, many of which would increase advocates' ability to achieve success when working with policy makers. This commentary explores those implications and examines how the proposed approach can be integrated within the field from a policy perspective.

Keywords

policy, advocacy, definition and/or conception of giftedness/talent, programming/service delivery models, social and/or emotional, development and adjustment

The work of Subotnik, Olszewski-Kubilius, and Worrell (2011, this issue) is the latest milestone in a field that is slowly beginning to reinvent itself. New conceptions, new models, and new research approaches are reinvigorating the field, and the ideas put forth by Subotnik et al. have accelerated these discussions and innovations. Is the proposed approach feasible from a policy perspective? Or perhaps more to the point, does this approach have the potential to influence public policy in helpful ways? Although policy and advocacy overlap considerably, I do not address advocacy issues in great depth, as those issues are targeted directly by Robinson (this issue).

Subotnik et al. make a strong case that there is a desperate need for more and better research on giftedness and gifted education. Many people will not think of this need as a policy issue, but the lack of a deep, high-quality research base is a major cause of the field's poor policy impact. For example, consider policy issues surrounding Advanced Placement programs. State policy makers are fond of AP incentive programs (Jackson, 2008), probably because such programs are easy to understand, the outcomes are highly predictable (i.e., providing incentives gets more students into AP courses; see Jeong, 2009), and the costs are considered reasonable given the ability to "check off" having addressed concerns about the lack of interventions for bright students and the lack of diversity in AP courses. Yet gifted education advocates have begun to worry about the law of unintended consequences (Gallagher, 2010): What are the hidden costs of these incentive programs? There are certainly opportunity costs, and the degree to which AP participation is beneficial for all high-ability students is an open question.

But until recently, evidence supporting these concerns was almost completely anecdotal, making it nearly impossible to engage policy makers in constructive debates about

how best to structure AP incentive legislation and policies. With The College Board able to provide policy makers with reams of hard data on course enrollment, educators' anecdotes simply do not carry a lot of weight. Now that research is being conducted on the implications and limitations of AP courses for gifted students (see, e.g., Foust, Hertberg-Davis, & Callahan, 2008; Hertberg-Davis & Callahan, 2008; Kyburg, Hertberg-Davis, & Callahan, 2007), advocates are much better equipped to interact with policy makers and make the case that even though AP is part of the solution, it is not the entire solution.

Moving beyond the call for more and better research, Subotnik et al.'s proposed approach to conceptualizing giftedness and gifted education essentially contrasts a whole child (i.e., traditional) approach with a outcomes-focused approach (i.e., that put forth in the target article). The outcomes-based conceptualization is understandably controversial, but it is logical and appropriate from a policy perspective. Although the whole child approach in many ways reflects the motivations of people entering the field (i.e., they want to help gifted children live better, more enjoyable, and fulfilled lives), a focus on outcomes is preferable within a policy context.

As a case in point, the "these kids are special" or "gifted children have special needs" argument is very risky in policy settings. This approach, which is a common advocacy strategy that flows naturally from the whole child perspective, is ultimately unproductive; the next group that walks into the

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policy maker's office can easily trump that approach with an "our kids are more special than their kids" argument. Arguing degrees of "specialness" is a tough order for the field, as high-ability children will always be viewed as advantaged over other groups of children.

A focus on the outcomes of gifted education is much more powerful. Arguing the societal benefits of programming for talented students matches the language that policy makers hear from other advocacy groups, and it fits well within the economic development (e.g., innovation, earning power) and/or social justice (equality of opportunity) mindsets that frame how the majority of policy makers approach legislation. For example, early childhood education is another field in which advocates can approach policy either from a whole child or outcomes-based approach. Within policy circles, outcomes-based arguments for early childhood education have been very successful. Debates on implementation of full-day kindergarten and other early childhood programs have largely been swayed by evidence of positive student outcomes throughout the life span (e.g., Chetty et al., 2010; Plucker, Eaton, et al., 2004; Plucker & Zapf, 2005; Schweinhart et al., 2005). Having similar evidence for gifted education would be helpful.

Granted the field is replete with stories of policy makers who perk up when approached with an outcomes-based argument, only later to be figuratively absent when the time comes to stand up for gifted education. But, as noted above, the field does not have enough research on intervention outcomes, and creating this research base will greatly assist interactions with policy makers. And I am not blind to the fact that the field does have very solid research bases on selected topics (e.g., acceleration), yet often finds itself on the wrong side of conventional wisdom and education policy in schools. But imagine how acceleration would be viewed if we did *not* have all of that research; again, we probably could not engage meaningfully in the policy conversations at all. Given that the whole child approach has dominated for an extended period of time, with at best mixed policy results, why not try something different? Even if the outcomes-focused approach did not have an appreciable policy impact, the resulting growth of evidence-based practice within the field that would likely result from the Subotnik et al. approach appears to be, of and by itself, worth the risk.

However, deep down, I am a whole child proponent. It is what brought me into the field, and it is what keeps bringing me back to it. I resisted outcomes-based justifications for gifted education for many years, in part because adopting such an argument felt like "selling out." As my youthful idealism faded into the rearview mirror and I worked more extensively in education policy, the limitations of the whole child approach became apparent, but I still have the whole child mindset in the back of my mind.

This personal bias leads me to ask whether these two approaches to the field are truly mutually exclusive. Can we not have both an outcomes-focused field and a field that uses

the whole child approach? In fairness to Subotnik et al., they do not say that the approaches are mutually exclusive, but they also do not say the opposite, either.

A good example of this dual approach is the recent study by Makel, Lee, Olszewski-Kubilius, and Putallaz (in press). They examined the Big Fish Little Pond Effect, which predicts that student self-concept decreases when students are put into more challenging educational environments. This model, which has been extensively researched (Marsh, Chessor, Craven, & Roche, 1995; Marsh, Plucker, & Stocking, 2001) but is not without its detractors (Plucker, Robinson, et al., 2004), has been used in some countries to argue against the creation of special schools or other programming for gifted students, making it a major policy issue. Makel et al. (in press) designed a study in which the self-concepts of gifted students were measured before, at the end of, and 6 months after participation in summer, residential programming for gifted students. The results are illuminating, with the data suggesting that student academic self-concepts were more likely to increase rather than decrease, and with nonacademic self-concepts showing evidence of gains for many students.

These researchers produced a number of important outcomes. Theoretically, their findings flesh out the Big Fish Little Pond Effect to help us better understand how environmental conditions may affect student self-concept development; from an affective perspective, the data provide some reassurance that participating in advanced, challenging programming can carry significant social and emotional benefits in addition to the expected academic benefits; and from a policy perspective, the results (in combination with other, similar studies) largely remove an argument against the provision of services for gifted students—and even put some positive outcomes on the table for future policy discussions. As a result, the research informs outcome-based approaches to gifted education, provides valuable information to those taking the whole child perspective, and directly informs policy. Everybody wins, and in the often fractured worlds of gifted education and education policy, that is quite the accomplishment.

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Bio

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