Giftedness as a framework of inclusive education

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Abstract
As societies move toward a deeper engagement with humanitarianism and egalitarianism, education systems have increasingly embodied a commitment to principles of inclusion. The field of gifted and talented education (GATE) has reflected these changes in recent discussions around equity, diversity, and inclusive practices. This article aims to re-examine the practices of gifted education and rethink the possibility of generating an egalitarianism-based, GATE-derived inclusive education discourse that can serve as a parallel to the predominant humanitarianism-drive inclusive education movement. Within a discourse of self-actualization, we propose framing “gifted” as a process-based, rather than person-based, construct that applies to all students as they are enabled to transact their gifts and talents through engaging in a “gift-ed” process through honing self-knowledge and learning gifted behaviors. We advocate the use of person-first language, (i.e., students with advanced learning needs/advanced and special learning needs (ALN/ASLN)) that will encourage specific interventions.

Keywords
Giftedness, inclusive education, advanced learning needs, labeling, response-to-intervention, differentiation, egalitarianism, self-actualization

Inclusive education movements have reflected rooted humanitarianism that addresses civil rights and removes barriers for opportunity associated with disabilities, socio-economic inequality (e.g., poverty, race), and other structurally neglected social groups (e.g., sexual orientation). Based on this humanitarian tradition, when inclusive education...
is applied to special education, the predominance of the attention has focused on students with learning disabilities and social-emotional/behavioral challenges. The discourse on serving students with advanced learning needs in an inclusive setting is under-developed, if not neglected, since the sub-population does not fall neatly into humanitarian categories and their learning needs are deemed as less emergent compared to other special education sub-populations. While the field of gifted and talented education (GATE) has developed teaching and learning strategies applicable to general population, the purpose of GATE has been confined to students with advanced learning needs (i.e., gifted students, conventionally speaking) and seems to struggle with finding greater relevance in general education.

This article aims to re-examine the practices of gifted education, including gifted labeling, and rethink the possibility of generating a GATE-derived inclusive education discourse that can serve as a parallel discourse to the predominant humanitarianism-drive inclusive education movement. The discourse will focus on: (1) reframing the definition of giftedness by applying a process-based ideology that conceptualizes giftedness as the process and outcome of self-actualization contingent on an individual’s developmental niches, self-knowledge, interests, and gifted behaviors, and (2) re-orienting existing identification and teaching practices in order to meet advanced learning needs within inclusive language and practices.

**Transacting giftedness in every student**

Meanings of words (as social constructs) are always changing. Giftedness has been communicated as a person-based quality since the beginning of the psychometric tradition. To some extent, the essentialist thinking and reductionist practices endemic to that tradition have created a class that entrenches social gaps and promotes elitism (Lo et al., 2019). As modern societies evolve to appreciate the beauty that resides in valuing individual differences and endorse egalitarianism, it has created opportunities for new meaning-making systems that allow a new gifted construct to emerge. Based on a paradigm of talent development (see Olszewski-Kubilius & Calvert, 2016), Lo et al. (2019) proposed that giftedness can be viewed as a dynamic personal growth construct pertaining to all learners rather than a static fixed trait pertaining to just a few. In other words, giftedness is construed as process-based rather than person-based. By adopting this process-based construct (i.e., gift²-ed), the term giftedness can be re-conceptualized as a pedagogical goal that every individual can achieve upon realizing, developing, and optimizing their personal potentials vis-à-vis a social context that promotes multiple pathways to personal excellence. Thus, this process-based construct of giftedness is egalitarian in nature as it reflects a strong belief that all individuals are worthy and deserve opportunities to achieve personal excellence through proper pedagogical guidance and scaffolding. In this sense, this reframed giftedness can serve as an overarching goal for inclusive education in its applicability to all individuals as it encourages every student to engage in a meaningful self-actualizing journey through understanding and realizing their personal strengths and developing their niche areas. Of note, while giftedness is construed as an egalitarian process-based construct (i.e.,
everyone deserves opportunities to transact their personal gifts) in this article, we do recognize that there are upper bounds of personal development given the individual differences in potential in various social domains and human endeavors (take Michael Jordan, Michelangelo, and Albert Einstein for example).

The reframing of giftedness from a trait of one student to a process for all students informs the pedagogical concept that all students have the right to become gifted (i.e., gift-ed) through participating in a continuum of enriched educational opportunities that matches their learning potential and needs. By doing so, the field of gifted education can devise a discourse of “an education that is gifted” and broaden its relevance to general education by contributing an alternative framework of inclusive education that is both philosophically and pedagogically informed.

This new direction poses an enormous potential for the field to re-examine and re-situate the GATE legacy accrued over the last century and make meaningful connections to the psychology of self-actualization. First, theories of intelligences can inform teachers in the preparation of a learning environment that encourages the development of multiple forms of intelligences and dispositions. For example, based on Sternberg’s (2020) theory of successful intelligence, teachers can design activities that cater toward students’ learning tendencies of asking what (analytical intelligence), how (practical intelligence), and why questions (creative intelligence). Based on Gardner’s (2006) theory of multiple intelligences, teachers can provide multi-modal options for students to demonstrate their learning outcomes. Furthermore, by rooting instruction in affordances to various intelligences and tendencies, students are exposed to increased opportunities to generate grounded self-knowledge. Second, existing and future studies on gifted behavior can provide a fertile ground for teaching all students the behavioral and social–emotional aspects (see Hymer, 2009; Olszewski-Kubilius & Calvert, 2016; Renzulli & Delcourt, 2013) of becoming “gift-ed,” such as coping with failure (e.g., innovation attempts) using a growth-mindset, self-advocating for advanced learning opportunities, being resourceful and seeking mentorship, providing accurate self-assessments, gaining insights into our future world, developing resilience, persistence, and work ethics, cultivating genuine connections, and sustaining self-regulating and life-long learning skills. In addition, Gagne’s Differentiated Model of Giftedness and Talent (DMGT, 2010) provides insights into environmental factors, as well as luck, that come into play in the process of self-actualization. Key areas where the authors diverge with Gagne’s DMGT model are that we define giftedness differently and extend the possibility of who can be gifted.

Meeting advanced learning needs in classrooms

The usage of the term gifted has been problematic (Hymer, 2009; Renzulli & Delcourt, 2013). First, both the label of gifted and the programming for gifted students are often monolithic in their application. Namely, the gifted label reflects a binary, universal, and static trait and the accompanying programming is general rather than responsive to specific areas of student need. Second, the label also lacks in communicative specificity as the term does not provide sufficient pedagogical information that goes beyond a general impression of being smarter than their age-peers. Third, the internal and external expectations associated with the label also create anxieties and other emotional burdens
that can be carried into adulthood. Moreover, due to its binary nature, the term gifted has been construed as elitist and has resulted in conflicts within societies that value egalitarianism (Lo et al., 2019). As many field scholars have argued, it is the mismatch between an individual’s learning needs and a local curriculum that should be identified and addressed, not construing giftedness as a global sub-population qualitatively distinct from the rest. To reflect the common practice of person-first language in today’s educational systems, it is pedagogically beneficial to consider replacing the term “gifted students” with “students with advanced learning needs (ALN),” and similarly, replacing “twice-exceptional students” with “students with advanced and special learning needs (ASLN).” By adopting these new terms, it can encourage educators to identify emerging mismatches in a classroom setting and devise targeted interventions and instructional differentiation.

Changing the label to students with advanced learning needs (ALN/ASLN) will require practitioners to mobilize more sources of assessment to describe the specificity of advanced learning needs, to devise corresponding intervention strategies, and to develop evidence-based trails that document students’ responses to the interventions (see Dixson et al.’s (2020) response-to-intervention [RtI] framework). Increments of formative and summative assessment, both formal and informal, will need to be developed to present justification for next-tier interventions that would demand further public resources.

By switching the focus of “identifying and serving gifted individuals” to “identifying and serving advanced learning needs through a track of evidence-based documentation,” we will be able to hold public spending in GATE accountable. By carefully designing learning opportunities and documenting students’ responses to these learning opportunities, it is more likely for students who simultaneously demonstrate advanced development in some cognitive areas (e.g., abstract thinking, creativity, critical thinking) and setbacks in performative areas (e.g., executive functioning, written output) to receive further psychoeducational assessment for potentially undiagnosed exceptionalities (e.g., learning disabilities) that may require a higher tier of support.

As an example, class-wide assessments for literacy are often done early in the school year. Equitable treatment means using a variety of assessments, including open-ended or ceiling-free tools that allow students to extend beyond the grade-level system. A student whose reading comprehension is advanced may also have challenges with decoding. Both are learning needs indicative of a mismatch between the regular curriculum content and the student’s learning profile. In our example, high level comprehension can be accessed via audio books, a school-level book club clustering students with ALN in literacy comprehension, or mentoring opportunities with a local Readers and Writers Festival. A student with this ALN may also share their own strategies and thoughts on how they might push their learning in their area(s) of strength. While decoding support falls under a well-established support track at all three RtI levels, students with ASLN may require a flexible or finessed support plan that takes into account their unique learning/social-emotional profile. In our example, the student may join or lead a mentoring program for beginning readers and receive school-wide decoding support from specialized staff who are sensitive to the learning needs of students with ASLN.
To design a continuum of enriched learning opportunities in classrooms, schools, and local education systems (e.g., a school district), classroom teachers should be versed in adopting development-embedded approaches (e.g., Beghetto and Kaufman’s (2014) Four C Model of Creativity, Kettler’s (2016) differentiated approach to critical thinking) to expand the learning spectrum of an instructional unit, and to create opportunities for screening for students who operate beyond the ceiling of regular enriched classroom instruction. In addition, classroom teachers should also be experts in scaffolding and elevating student learning through providing growth-encouraging feedback (e.g., by designing well thought-out rubrics). Administrators should be mindful of providing continuums of tier-2 (i.e., school-level resource programs, such as school clubs, cluster grouping, and AP classes) and tier-3 (i.e., school-district level resource programs, such as mentorship, and dual-enrollment) learning activities and be prepared to refer forward students who operate beyond the ceiling of a local context (Dixson et al., 2020). The mobility to a next-level intervention should be based on evidence of a student’s responses to differentiated instruction and promote equitable entrance to all students regardless of race, gender, and other socio-structural disadvantages (Lo et al., 2019).

Concluding remarks

Egalitarianism has become one of the fundamental values in the 21st century as our society becomes more progressive. This has resulted in its manifestation within education. The idea of giftedness as something that can be developed in all learners can empower students to take control over their own learning. It can also encourage teachers to create an enriched learning environment and advocate for advanced learning opportunities that help students develop personal niches and personal excellence. Moreover, it presents opportunities for our field to reflect on, and broaden the relevance of, our intellectual and pedagogical contributions.

As Renzulli and Delcourt (2013) stated, “it is far better to have imprecise answers to the right questions than precise answers to the wrong questions” (p. 42). It is clear that the GATE field has been undergoing some conceptual changes and soul-searching in recent years. This special issue provides a ground for our field to further reflect on the justification, necessity, and utility of continuing to use the word “gifted” as an educational designation. We believe that the adoption of person-first language (students with ALN/ASLN) can result in more productive communication by reducing the historical baggage of elitism, removing the emotional burden of an imprecise label from the students, diagnosing context-based real-time learning needs (i.e., mismatch between a student’s ability and a curriculum), and encouraging precise learning interventions and differentiation strategies. All in all, we hope this article stands as an opportunity for GATE researchers and practitioners to re-examine the progress that we have made in the field and re-situate our discourse and practices to reflect the emerging values of the 21st century.
Declaration of conflicting interests
The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding
The author(s) disclosed receipt of the following financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article: Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (GR003697).

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Notes
1. We use GATE and gifted education interchangeably in this article.
2. Here we use gifts to denote personal intelligences, abilities, strengths, dispositions, and interests in general.
3. Namly, recognizing, realizing, and actualizing personal intelligences, abilities, strengths, dispositions, and interests.

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