

Making Decisions About Out of School Provisions for Gifted and Talented Students

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There is no single solution to meeting the diverse intellectual, creative, cultural, physical, social, and emotional needs of gifted and talented students. Ideally, their differentiated, enriched, and accelerated education is best conceptualised as a continuum of approaches. This continuum begins in all classrooms and extends through school-based programmes to provisions outside of school. There is a simple reason for this: children spend only part of their lives in school, and although it is a large portion of each day, only a fraction of their school day may be spent in a specialised, school-based programme to develop their gifts and talents.

And yet, gifted and talented students have special abilities and qualities 24 hours a day, 7 days a week! Their insatiable curiosity, urgent need to know, abstract conceptualisations, creative drive, quest for advanced knowledge and skills, search for an intellectual soul mate, zest for new ideas, and so on don't stay behind in the classroom or playground when the bell rings at 3:00 or holidays begin. Their special abilities and qualities stay with them as they walk out the school gate.

The many possible out-of-school opportunities to help unlock and unleash potential include home activities and resources; community-based opportunities; the services of non-profit organizations; special Saturday and holiday programmes; competitions; distance education; and mentoring. Given the wide range of possibilities, making decisions about out of school programmes can be difficult. This brief paper provides some guidance and direction for parents and educators in their quest to find the appropriate programme for gifted and talented students.

Opening the School Gate

How does one decide which is the best option? As Hollander (1999) reminds, there is no "best" option. Selection and decision-making are very much individual and whatever options are chosen should be carefully matched to the needs of the gifted and talented student. "Program attributes are important because they determine the type of student for whom the experience is most appropriate" (Olszewski-Kubilius, 2003, p. 220).

When making decisions, Hollander (1999) recommends asking questions of the directors and staff involved, particularly inquiring about the structure and nature of the programme. As she states,

Gifted children often do better with less structure and more freedom ... hands-on, interactive, and open-ended ... They are not challenged by the 'follow-the-dot' curriculum and will become bored with this approach (Hollander, 1999, p. 6).

[Stephens](#) (2002) recommends that in selecting programmes, questions should be asked regarding the selection criteria, quality of the curriculum, teacher expertise and professional development, and facilities and resources. Ideally, a programme will adhere to the core principles and practices of gifted and talented education: multi-method approaches to identification; qualitatively differentiated enriched and accelerated learning experiences; responsive learning environments; and individualization to meet intellectual, creative, physical, social, and emotional needs. In order for the theoretical principles of gifted and talented education to be put into practice, facilitators and teachers need expertise and specialised training. Discussions with providers, reading of promotional materials, and observation of the programme in action will assist in determining appropriateness.

Hollander (1999) also suggests discussions with current or former students and their parents who can give an insider's view of the programme. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, she suggests direct dialogue with the gifted and talented student – what is her special interest and what would she like to gain through the experience? As [Stephens](#) (2002) reminds parents,

“Additionally, you must also take into account your child’s academic and social strengths and weaknesses. An educational program that may be perfect for some children may not be the right one for your child” (no page given).

In making decisions about out of school provisions, teachers and parents should consider the questions in the table below to determine general suitability for gifted and talented students. There are questions that need to be asked regarding the philosophy and curriculum of the programme, as well as more practical queries regarding costs, location, and dates.

Questions to Assist in Choosing an Out-of-School Provision

<p>Principles of Gifted and Talented Education</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• How are students selected for the programme – is the programme homogeneous or heterogeneous in its approach?• Does the programme provide learning opportunities, regardless of age, that develop strengths and interests rather than focusing on weaknesses or age appropriate activities?• Does the programme provide a chance for socialisation with students of similar abilities, skills, and interests?• Will the programme enhance self-understanding and appreciation of individuality in relation to the student’s gifts and talents?• Does the programme provide enriched and accelerated learning opportunities that challenge students with a variety of qualitatively differentiated activities?• Does the programme allow for choice and flexibility based on student interests and strengths?• Does the programme balance academic, physical, and social/recreational opportunities in a learning environment that differs from the typical classroom? <p>Practical Issues</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Does the programme provide opportunities over the long term?• Does the programme articulate well with other experiences?• What are the qualifications and experiences of the adults involved in the programme in regards to gifted and talented students?• What are the policies regarding safety and supervision?• Does the programme provide adequate and appropriate resources to support student engagement in learning?• What are the costs, location, deadlines, and so on? (Callahan, 2004; Cook et al., 2004; Knox, 1997; Lean, 2004; Pitman, 2001; Rogers, 2002; Roth & Brooks-Gunn, 2000; Smutny, 2002).

If schools are recommending and supporting programmes for gifted and talented students, it is also important to consider how those articulate with the school-based programmes. The questions in the table below are suggested as good starting points for reflection and discussion by principals, gifted education coordinators and teachers who might be utilising programmes by community-based providers.

Facilitating Better Articulation Between School-Based and Out of School Programmes: Questions for Educators

<ul style="list-style-type: none">• How will the activities complement what is already being offered for gifted and talented students in the school and the local area?• How are continuity and progression ensured?• Which provider groups will be involved in the planning? How will they be involved in the whole process?• How will any successful partnerships created by the activity be developed for the benefit of all students?• Who is involved in selecting students for the activity?• How are participants to be selected?• Have the needs of minority groups been properly considered?

- What is the role of student and adult mentors in the activity? How will their involvement be planned into the programme?
- How will the activity be monitored and evaluated? Who will do this?
- How will the successes of the activity be communicated in the local area?
- How will the outcomes be built on in the future, so that the experience is not isolated? ([Freeman](#), 2004, p. 46)

Rogers (2002) encourages the creation of an educational plan for gifted and talented students that considers both immediate and future opportunities. The plan should include information regarding the student's characteristics, the identification methods used, and the provisions selected. It may also include the timeframe and an evaluation of the programme's effectiveness from the perspective of parents, teachers, and the student. As this plan is developed and out of school activities are considered, it would be important to address the articulation between provisions both at the time of the student's enrolment and in the future. Ideally, this plan should be developed as a collaborative effort between teachers, families, outside providers and community members, and gifted and talented students.

Given the wide range of out-of-school provisions, the success of these is reliant upon careful decision-making. The gifted and talented student should be at the centre of the decisions, ensuring a careful match between the programme and the individual. As has been discussed, this begins with careful and thorough identification of the student's strengths and interests. Based upon the student's needs, the programmes offered need to be fully explored. The table below shows some possible close matches between student characteristics and programmes outside of school. It is by no means definitive or exhaustive, but may be useful in the search for the right fit. Gifted and talented students are not a homogeneous group rather they are a group of individuals, each with his or her unique abilities and qualities. As such, their needs will differ and what works for one gifted and talented student might not necessarily meet the needs of another student. Finding the right match requires vast information gathering (about programmes and students), ongoing discussion and questioning, collaboration between home and school, and careful monitoring and evaluation.

Matching Programmes and Students

Student Wants and Needs	Programme Possibilities
Social interaction and relationships with like-minded peers	Saturday and holiday programmes of substantial durations Online distance education learning communities Mentorships
Exposure to new ideas, people and places through cultural enrichment	Community-based cultural provisions Home activities Saturday and holiday enrichment programmes Distance education enrichment programmes
Advanced content and increased pace of study	Saturday and holiday accelerated programmes Mentorships with experts/professionals Accelerated distance education programmes
Career development	Mentorships or internships in workplace Saturday and holiday programmes with career focus
Recognition and opportunities to showcase talents	Competitions Talent Searches Private organizations and associations for gifted and talented Community-based programmes
Leadership development	Community-based programmes Competitions for leadership recognition Mentoring (student as mentor)
Service learning and volunteerism	Community-based organizations Home and family activities Competitions for service recognition

Technological skills	Online distance education programmes Saturday and holiday technology programmes Competitions in technology Community groups and clubs
Creativity	Saturday and holiday programmes in creativity development Competitions that focus on creative problem solving and products Home activities
Recreational and social development	Community-based clubs and organizations Holiday and Saturday programmes with recreational component Home activities
Research skills	Mentorships with research purpose Holiday and Saturday programmes involving independent or small group research Competitions involving research
Artistic development	Community-based activities and organizations Competitions with artistic purposes Holiday and Saturday arts programmes Home activities

Gifted and talented students require a continuum of learning experiences and opportunities in order to fully reach their potential. Author Graham Greene wrote, "There is always one moment in childhood when the door opens and lets the future in" ([Brainy Quotes](#), 2004). A positive future for gifted and talented students begins as we open the school gate to the wide world of possibilities for talent development. Teachers, parents, families, and community members are the gatekeepers of the systematic and complete recognition and development of tomorrow's gifts and talents – they open the gate for gifted and talented students!

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