



Aligning Education With Student Needs: Lessons From Gifted and Talented Education

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Abstract: American education has inherited beliefs and practices unaligned with 21st-century needs, which prevents us from providing an appropriate education to many students. To reimagine what education could and should be, we must understand tensions between shifting societal values, developmental goals, and educational structures. After discussing some of the values that pull education toward different goals, we present several lessons learned from gifted and talented education pertinent to changing broader educational structures. A key theme in these lessons is that pivoting away from the age-in-grade model to one that flexibly addresses diverse individual learning pathways can help to increase equity and excellence, as well as develop individual talent for self-fulfillment and societal betterment.

Keywords: Education reform, gifted and talented education, individualized education, interdisciplinarity

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The American education system has faced growing challenges in the 21st century, including widening achievement gaps, shifting workforce demands, and debates over the purpose

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of schooling (Brandt, 2010). To address these issues, it is important to imagine how we might reshape our education system to adapt to these evolving needs. Educational reform is a complex and formidable task, and our intention is not to simplify its many challenges. Rather, the aim of this conceptual paper is to highlight the tension between ongoing calls for an education system that accommodates diverse developmental pathways and entrenched educational structures built upon the myth of the average student. We argue that our current education system falls short of its full potential because, in designing schools to meet the needs of the average student, we have created a system that truly fits no one. To illuminate possible paths forward, we draw on lessons learned from reform efforts in the field of gifted and talented education (GATE), which highlight the need to move beyond a one-size-fits-all model and toward a system that maximizes student development through more flexible, individualized learning pathways. This piece represents a synthesis of several years of coursework, personal research, and work on GATE-related grants throughout our doctoral program in giftedness, creativity, and talent development. During the course of our studies, we have attempted to map GATE research onto the larger educational landscape, especially in terms of broad structural reforms. Based on these insights, we offer practical recommendations for educators and researchers seeking to effect change at both grassroots and systemic levels.

The Goals and Values of Contemporary Education Systems

To reimagine American education, we must first consider the overarching goals this system should seek to achieve. Do we aim to cultivate a base level of knowledge and skills that will help students in adulthood? Or, is our focus to equip the next generation of workers with the tools needed to drive economic development? Or, to realize the maximal development of each student's unique potential? Within this limited sample of objectives, each goal has distinct implications regarding the ideal education system. What is more, each goal is embedded in a larger context of core tensions that have long existed in American education, making consensus on goals a difficult task. And although goal definition is emphasized in educational design (e.g., IDEO, 2012) and curriculum development (e.g., Wiggins & McTighe, 2005), such fundamental questions are commonly overlooked in public discourse about education. Yet, to transform our approach to education, asking these questions is a necessary first step.

This discussion of goals cannot happen without reference to the larger system of values in which education is embedded. The goals of our education system have changed significantly over time and will continue to do so (Labaree, 2018; Tyack & Tobin, 1994). Given the nature of American discourse—with its pluralism, plethora of cultures, and distinct political factions—it should be no surprise that education is pulled in many directions at once. Our educational system occupies an ever-shifting position on a landscape where distinct pulls produce tensions along at least two different spectrums: One between equity and excellence, the other between self-fulfillment and societal contribution. The first tension is born of having to educate every school-age child up to a common standard with limited resources; the second stems from the ongoing dialogue between individual liberty and our responsibilities to others. These tensions are always in flux, and because they are among the fundamental “competing, legitimate values” of our society, they do not admit of an obvious balance (Kaestle, 2001, p. 17). In our minds, the ideal system of education should balance *all* these values and adapt dynamically to shifting contexts.

As David Labaree (1997, 2018) has written, the goals of American education have changed significantly throughout history. Education was first centered around shaping a virtuous citizenry, then around producing capable workers, and, presently, it focuses on readying

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individuals for competition in the modern economy. As Labaree (1997) wrote, the first two perspectives (the public roles of the citizen and taxpayer) are fundamentally different from the latter perspective, which is a private one: that of the *consumer*. Whereas the first two educational outlooks place society at the center, with individuals working in the service of a larger good, the latest—and current—model places *the individual* at the center, with society working for a single person’s good. This is a profound shift in terms of educational aims, with consequences for how students navigate the American school system.

Alongside these developments in educational goals, American schools transitioned from one-room schoolhouses to the current system of age-graded schools; schooling, in the minds of many, has come to mean a system of grades and classes wherein students are divided first by age, and then by subject—a system that Tyack and Tobin (1994) refer to as the “grammar” of schooling. To most Americans, this is the grammar that seems most reasonable. However, “there was nothing inevitable about organizing students into age-based cohorts and having them move together in lockstep . . . But over time, that came to seem natural. To most Americans today, that’s what a ‘real’ school looks like” (Heller, 2020, p. 33). As present-day educators, we have inherited these goals and systems. They do not reflect static truths about education, they are not always in alignment with one another, and they were not specifically created to meet the needs of 21st-century students and societies, which require more student-centered approaches that accommodate diverse developmental pathways (González-Pérez & Ramírez-Montoya, 2022; Subotnik et al., 2011). Indeed, much of the tension we currently experience, and the corresponding impetus to reimagine American education, stems from misalignment between the goals and systems we have inherited and the modern needs we strive to meet. When facing the massive systemic problems inherent in educational reform, analogous contexts can often offer inspiration and guidance. We believe that the field of GATE—one related, yet distinct educational space—can offer a number of insights relevant to broader educational reform.

Trends in Gifted and Talented Education

As both authors research within the context of GATE, we hope to bring some lessons from our field to bear on this conversation. We do not suggest that these are the only principles fit to guide American education, but we believe they can helpfully inform the discussion over where our educational system is headed. Ever since GATE’s inception in the early twentieth century—where it arose following the import of intelligence testing to the United States—it has occupied a strange space in the educational landscape. Dai and Chen (2013) noted two primary inspirations for gifted education, roughly centered around the work of Lewis Terman (1925) and Leta Stetter Hollingworth (1942). In their view, Terman saw high-achieving students (those that would eventually be called “gifted”) as the drivers of societal betterment, whereas Hollingworth saw the *gifted experience* as something requiring unique educational opportunities. Even since the beginning, GATE has had multiple, sometimes contradictory reasons for existing; in this way, GATE has long been a part of schools, but it is also *apart* from schools. One beneficial aspect of this relative isolation is that GATE has had more space and freedom than general education to ask questions about its identity and existence. Just what should GATE be, and for whom? Like the rest of the educational system, we have often struggled with the four tensions outlined above. Recently, researchers and practitioners in the field have been exploring the complex relationship between equity and excellence—something not unique to our field, but present in all conversations of American educational reform (Dai, 2013; Meyer & Plucker, 2022). When education became universal and mandatory, people began to voice concerns about how we could

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manage an excellent education for an unprecedented number of students. It was no different for GATE. Throughout history, the field has been swept up in several distinct paradigms, trying to answer fundamental questions about how to conceptualize, identify, and develop students' gifts and talents (Dai & Chen, 2013; 2014).

At the same time, GATE has vigorously debated its *raison d'être*—does it work for students as individuals, for the benefit of society, or on behalf of both simultaneously? For a number of decades our field has floated the idea that gifted youth and advanced learners are a precious national resource not to be squandered (McClain & Pfeiffer, 2012; Office of Educational Research and Improvement, 1993), reflecting a similar opinion to that of Terman, mentioned above. After all, it is argued, these students will one day become the country's leaders. This line of justification for gifted education is still popular, with some arguing that “the country needs these children to be highly educated to ensure its long-term competitiveness, security, and innovation” (Wright, 2022, para. 8). As with all forms of American education, GATE has been pushed and pulled by these different but equally-legitimate values, producing a series of transformations mirroring broader ethical and political trends.

To give a brief overview of our field's history, we can mark several distinct paradigms with Lo and Porath's (2017) framework of *demystification*, *identification*, and *transaction*. Prior to the 20th century, our field began with attempts to *demystify* the nature of intelligence through psychometric testing. As researchers got better at measurement, they began to hone in on *identifying and serving* the intellectually gifted. Originally, students were identified solely through IQ testing. Yet, throughout the 20th century, scholars began noting elements of high-achievement and talent that were not always identified with intelligence tests. Thus, the field saw ever-expanding conceptualizations of giftedness beyond IQ, and advocates sought to create better ways to identify and serve more diverse forms of giftedness—for instance, serving those advanced in leadership or creativity, as advocated for by the critically important Marland Report, which put gifted education on the federal map (Gallagher, 2023). GATE is currently moving toward a *transaction* paradigm focused on providing individual students with what they need to develop academically or in specific talent domains. At present, our field is intensely focused on issues of diversity, equity, inclusion, and accessibility. We are moving toward models that provide *all* students with the educational support and challenge they need to develop their potential.

These paradigms illustrate the origins of our field in terms of its service models and lines of research. We have largely moved from stringent conceptions of innate giftedness based around general intelligence to expansive definitions inclusive of things like leadership and creativity (National Association for Gifted Children [NAGC], 2019), even though many states still rely heavily on IQ testing to determine gifted status (McClain & Pfeiffer, 2012). Several decades ago, scholars (e.g., Gagné, 1995; Renzulli, 1978) began to move away from entity-based conceptions of giftedness, and many now view giftedness in largely contextual and developmental ways, increasingly through a talent-development lens specific to various domains (e.g., NAGC, 2010; Subotnik et al., 2021). Scholarship focuses more on universal enrichment (e.g., Renzulli & Reis, 2014) and Advanced Academics models (Peters et al., 2013) that eschew the “gifted” label altogether. Perhaps most importantly, our field is striving to right historical wrongs stemming from gatekeeping based on ethnicity or class (for an analysis of historical inequities, see Gentry et al., 2019). Much of our current energy is being channeled into identifying and serving students from minoritized populations. In short, the arc of GATE has grown continually to encompass more notions of giftedness, more service models, and greater

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numbers of students who receive an appropriate level of challenge in schools. Having traced the trajectory of our field, we now present several key takeaways relevant to broader educational reform.

Lessons Learned from Gifted and Talented Education

Lesson 1: Education Is Most Transformative When It Accommodates Students' Diverse Learning Profiles and Equally Diverse Learning Needs

In tandem with evolving conceptualizations of giftedness, GATE has experienced broader shifts in efforts to identify students for gifted and talented programming. Early identification practices involved a narrow focus on standardized intelligence tests, but this approach has long been criticized for overlooking talents in both marginalized populations and areas beyond general intellectual ability (Callahan et al., 2017). It is now more common for states and districts to screen all students for gifts and talents using a combination of assessments, which can include teacher ratings, behavioral checklists, and achievement, performance, and creativity tests (McClain & Pfeiffer, 2012). Although specific practices vary across states and districts, schools increasingly use universal screening and decision-making rubrics that consider multiple sources of data (e.g., cognitive tests, teacher ratings, work portfolios), rather than relying on a single cutoff score (e.g., IQ > 130; Callahan et al., 2017; Rinn et al., 2022). More emphasis is also placed on identifying domain-specific gifts and talents, such as marked potential in ELA or mathematics (Gubbins et al., 2021).

Paralleling trends in general education, researchers have argued that specific considerations must be made for traditionally underserved populations, including culturally, linguistically, economically, and neurologically diverse students, who remain chronically underrepresented in GATE programs (Al-Hroub, 2013; Ezzani et al., 2021). Contradicting rigid expectations, tests, and curricula that neglect or deny differences in student development, these advances in identification parallel broader trends in which GATE has intensified its efforts to provide equitable, individualized, interdisciplinary learning. Although there is room for continued improvement, it is well-recognized that best practice involves identifying students from diverse backgrounds for programming aligned with their interests, strengths, and needs (Corwith et al., 2019).

Lesson 2: GATE Can Offer Research-Based Practices Important to Meeting Students' Varied Needs

Unsurprisingly, views on how to provide optimal programming in GATE have evolved in similar ways. Few in the field currently defend the “Country Club” model in which privileged students are removed from the regular classroom to spend time among intellectual peers. Rather, scholarship and corresponding practice have pivoted toward providing opportunities for domain-specific talent development (e.g., Subotnik et al., 2021) and universal enrichment (e.g., Renzulli & Reis, 2014). These developments have been informed by decades of research demonstrating that the most effective GATE practices include acceleration (moving through curricula at a faster-than-typical rate), ability grouping (flexibly placing students into groups in response to specific learning needs), curricular interventions (using structured lesson plans), and enrichment (engaging students in authentic disciplinary work; Plucker & Callahan, 2020). Collectively, the evidence supporting these shifts underscores the importance of balancing targeted skill

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development with authentic, enriched learning opportunities to support diverse learners and cultivate their unique talents.

Lesson 3: To Achieve Any Goal We Set for Education, We Must Move From Age-Based Grades to More Individualized Learning

Aligning with shifts in identification, changes in GATE programming highlight another notable trend: Learning has become increasingly student-centered. In our minds, individualized learning is the most viable means of simultaneously achieving equity, excellence, personal fulfillment, and societal contribution. However, entirely individualized learning is also costly, demanding, and poorly aligned with the entrenched age-in-grade paradigm. As a result, differentiation within mixed-ability classrooms is the most prevalent approach (Gubbins et al., 2021), despite the fact that it is challenging to implement in classrooms where readiness levels span up to seven grade levels (Peters & Borland, 2020) and is rarely used to challenge students who have already mastered grade-level content (Ritzema et al., 2016). Just as special education services are necessary for students who require greater support in their learning, students with gifts and talents deserve educational services that meet their unique needs (Corwith et al., 2019). Without appropriate services, students with gifts and talents are at risk of underachieving (Siegle et al., 2017; Snyder & Adelson, 2017), and failing to realize these students' full potential will have negative consequences for both their individual growth and their ability to contribute meaningfully to society. To better meet such students' needs, researchers have stressed the importance of sustained professional learning opportunities on research-supported practices such as acceleration, flexible ability grouping, and enrichment (Johnsen et al., 2020).

Lesson 4: Providing a Meaningful, Modern Education Involves Expanding Beyond a Narrow Focus on Academics

Our field has welcomed many different disciplines—some never before included in traditional education. Doing so has pushed GATE beyond education's fixation on literacy and numeracy. Although we do not intend to undermine the value of these subjects, literacy and numeracy do not represent the sole indicators of a meaningful education. To develop skills important to life in the 21st century, researchers have called for more authentic learning in schools (e.g., Abrami et al., 2015; Hashemi & Cederlund, 2017). This approach involves providing students with scaffolded opportunities to work with real-world content in a manner similar to discipline experts (Koh, 2019), with the aim of developing 21st-century skills like creativity, critical thinking, collaboration, and communication (Brandt, 2010). Within GATE, these opportunities are commonly offered through the Schoolwide Enrichment Model, which involves scaffolded experiences where students are introduced to authentic disciplinary content and activities (Type I), develop higher-level thinking and social-emotional skills (Type II), and engage in self-directed projects resembling the work of professionals in the field (Type III; Renzulli & Reis, 1985, 2014). Enrichment programs typically represent a fraction of instructional time, yet considerable research has shown that they improve both academic achievement and social-emotional development (Kim, 2016). Complementing arguments for individualized learning, providing interdisciplinary opportunities further adds to diversity in education, a perspective that undermines "the expectation that everybody should be moving in lockstep through a series of 10-month years in a standardized system and coming out at pretty much the same place by age 18" (Eisner, 2001, p. 372).

Where Does Education Go From Here?

The lessons above highlight a clear trend: a shift from schools providing a baseline level of knowledge and skills to maximally developing each student's unique potential. Paralleling broader societal trends, this shift also helps ease tensions between equity, excellence, self-fulfillment, and societal contribution. It is our belief that achieving this goal of maximal development would simultaneously address each of these four dimensions. Educational goals have shifted in this direction, but our educational structures continue to lag behind. Just as these goals have evolved, so too must the systems that seek to achieve them.

So, what structures are needed to maximally develop students' various potentials? Lessons learned from GATE indicate that this would involve individualized learning with diverse areas of focus. In such a system, the common curriculum would be supplemented with personalized education plans aligning with each student's psychosocial needs, specific interests, and developmental readiness. Although perhaps ideal, this system could also prove to be disorganized, inefficient, and difficult to manage. Furthermore, it is entirely in conflict with entrenched educational structures that were designed for homogenous services and outcomes. Yet, to achieve modern educational goals, it is precisely these structures that must be challenged. Researchers in our field have proposed paths forward, presenting approaches that could help educational institutions evolve to better meet students' needs. In the following section, we highlight several of these arguments. However, it is important to first note that systemic change requires the coordinated efforts of diverse parties, from politicians to parents, and from teachers to students. Rinn et al. (2022) emphasized the need for policy, funding, training, programming standards, and accountability to support meaningful progress in GATE, and these same conditions will be required for broader educational reform. Many necessary changes are beyond the scope of any one teacher, school, or district. Therefore, we describe both the broader structural changes that are necessary to transform our educational landscape and the steps that individual educators and researchers can take to contribute to these efforts.

What Can Policymakers Do?

A broad overhaul of existing educational structures may be ideal for achieving the level of individual specialization required to develop students to their potential, but meaningful progress often requires incremental, actionable steps. One key step will involve rethinking the rigid age-in-grade paradigm and developing within-school structures where students could be flexibly grouped (*not* permanently tracked) according to readiness in specific subject areas. Student needs and talent areas vary considerably, so any movement away from our ossified and homogeneous system would push us closer to individualized learning pathways in diverse talent domains. When considering the tension between individual interests and a body of common knowledge underpinning a shared society, we imagine a hybrid system. Feldman (2020) proposed a half-and-half structure to education, in which half the day is dedicated to a basic-skills curriculum while the other half focuses on individual areas of interest. To us, this model would go a long way in pulling our system closer to balance between the major tensions outlined above. Of course, these broadest shifts will be made difficult by systemic barriers, such as policy constraints, resource limitations, and an ingrained culture that is resistant to change. The funding and training necessary to support these changes will require significant resources, and reform efforts must balance federal and state guidelines with sensitivity to local contexts (Harris & Jones, 2018; Rinn et al., 2022).

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What Can Districts and Schools Do?

More locally, districts and schools can expand their Multi-Tiered Systems of Support (MTSS) to scale *upward* for advanced learners, just as these systems are often used to scaffold for learners who need additional help. The Advanced Academics model (Peters et al., 2013) proposes this type of tiered support for advanced learners, operating under the belief that such learners have the right to be educated at the appropriate level of challenge. An expanded notion of MTSS is a start, though we would like to point out that this framework is still predicated on a homogeneous view of learners and education, resting upon the comforting-but-specious notion of an “average” group of students for which a solid curriculum and good classroom instruction are sufficient. Any expansion of MTSS is good, but we encourage educators and administrators to move beyond systems built upon such tired myths.

At the school level, some have broken away from traditional notions of the lockstep education model. Rhim (2020) described Summit Sierra High School in Seattle, which creates student-specific learning pathways, allowing all students to meet weekly with mentor groups that provide many types of support: “This structure, in which every student learns at their own pace, creates an inclusive environment without a stark delineation between general and special education” (p. 20). We would like to say that this excellent structure could be adapted for use with *all* learners, therefore blurring the boundaries between general, special, *and* gifted and talented education. In fact, most school-level changes toward the ideal we describe come from blurring as many educational lines as possible. Renzulli Academy in Hartford, Connecticut promotes enrichment for all its students and is dedicated to universal talent development. Indeed, enrichment should never be just for students identified as gifted; enrichment is a wide window onto many worlds, and the more subjects and domains students come into contact with, the more likely we are as educators to spot individual talents and passions. Likewise, schools should not hesitate to accelerate students, either in specific domains or across grades. Of course, this must be done prudently, but acceleration is one of the most effective tools we have for promoting maximal development in students (Colangelo et al., 2004). The tools of GATE should be adopted to promote student learning among all school populations. As VanTassel-Baska (2006) wrote, “In an ideal system, gifted education could be considered an equal collaborative partner in raising achievement for all” (p. 209).

What Can Teachers Do?

The teacher’s role in all this is to push for diverse, individualized learning pathways as much as possible, whether this means fighting to get more students involved in enrichment activities at school or to accelerate a student who needs it. Likewise, teachers can increasingly use flexible ability grouping. At times, this might involve within-class differentiation, whereas other situations might necessitate movement between different classrooms and grade levels. Paralleling the school-level recommendations presented above, teachers can increasingly engage in broad enrichment to diminish barriers between GATE and general education, while using acceleration or readiness grouping to blur the harsh lines between age-based grades. Overall, teachers are the grassroots advocates for school-level change. While still working within the constraints of our current educational structures, teachers can model these research-supported practices and present a powerful example of how providing flexible learning pathways is a more effective approach to developing diverse students’ unique potentials. With enough time and examples, these changes will spread across teachers, schools, districts, and beyond.

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What Can Researchers Do?

While researchers can continue to study acceleration, flexible ability grouping, and other practices, we envision researchers going beyond individual practices to investigate broader structural issues. For instance, we know that many of the suggested practices are supported by evidence, but we need to assess whether their affordances can be leveraged within the general education system. We can foresee several interesting avenues of research, based on our argument above. Scholars could study how schools might transition from an age-in-grade model to one that is more sensitive to developmental differences. They could pilot other structural changes at the local level—with schools that wish to champion these reforms—to determine their feasibility at the level of individual schools or districts. Finally, because we are advocating broad, systemic change, scholars could inform broader policy development by studying the scalability of these structural changes.

A unifying characteristic of these recommendations for policymakers, districts, schools, teachers, and researchers is that analyzing and restructuring education at any of these levels requires careful consideration of modern students' needs, the existing state of education systems, and the broader goals we seek to achieve. Importantly, no reform effort can ignore the influence of local contexts. Within the United States, there is tremendous variability across states, districts, schools, and students. To effect meaningful, lasting change, we must carefully balance shared objectives and local needs, in addition to equity, excellence, self-fulfillment, and societal betterment.

Conclusion: What Should We Hope for American Education?

We hope that two things have become clear: 1) American education as currently conceived is a far cry from what it could or should be; and 2) Any movement away from the convenient myth of the average student is welcome so long as it moves in the direction of flexibly addressing diverse individual learning pathways—whether that be at the level of instructional differentiation in the classroom, a single school relaxing its norms around acceleration, or an entire school district reimagining its age-in-grade structure. As all teachers know, there is no average student, leading us to one last analogy:

During World War II, the United States Air Force aircrafts were crashing at a higher-than-expected rate even though no mechanical and human errors could be detected. After much probing, the Air Force commissioned a study in 1950 to design a better fitting cockpit based on the average of more than 4000 pilots on 140 body measurements. Yet, when Lieutenant Gilbert S. Daniels did an exercise to see how many pilots fit the so called “average pilot” on 10 dimensions ... it was impossible to find even one individual who fit the average ... Essentially, by designing the cockpit to fit the average airman, it was ensured that it fit no one. (Subramanian et al., 2018, p. 78)

Similarly, by designing a school system to fit the average student, we have ensured that it fits no one.

To return to the landscape of tensions we mentioned at the beginning, we believe that maximally developing student potential would provide necessary balance between competing, legitimate values. An education based both on common standards and individual learning pathways would provide students a high level of knowledge and skills, promoting excellence.

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Likewise, it would grant all students the personalized tools they need to succeed, ensuring equity. The individual focus on student passions and talents would satisfy the human need for self-fulfillment. Finally, synthesizing these values will lead to maximal development, yielding new technologies, philosophies, arts, and experiences for all of society. As it takes all kinds to make a world, diversifying and individualizing learning is a necessary step toward reshaping American education for the betterment of students and all of society.

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