

Standards and Standards Plus: A Good Idea or a New Cage?

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At the 1999 annual meeting of the National Association for Gifted Children, I was part of a panel that dealt with issues the field should consider as we approach the new millennium. One of the topics with which I dealt had to do with how gifted education should address the current concern about the new standards movement that is sweeping like a tidal wave over general education. My thoughts on this topic are discussed in this brief reflection on the standards movement, and other thoughts on gifted education in the new millennium will be presented in another article currently being developed.

Some advocates for gifted education have jumped on the standards bandwagon without a great deal of thought about the very predictable practical implications of this current national juggernaut. One need only reflect back to the behavioral objectives movement or the performance contracting fad to realize that these kinds of imposed regulations on learning have not improved schools and seldom last longer than the gurus and politicians who think they can legislate results. If standards are good for all students, it is argued, then it is obvious that we should have “standards plus” for the gifted! At first glance, this assertion seems to make sense—who could be against high standards for our nation and super standards for the gifted?

Whenever I think about the standards issue, I like to point to a metal sculpture on my desk that shows a man in a cage clutching the bars, while behind his back the door to the cage is wide open. The sculpture is symbolic of Eric Fromm’s classic book, *Escape From Freedom* (1941), in which the author maintains that many people, given the opportunity, will turn their backs on freedom. Many advocates of gifted education believe that freedom from an inadequate regular curriculum is precisely why we need special programs for exceptional students. Standards and standards plus may “sound good,” but they are clearly a throwback to the lack of freedom that characterizes so much of regular education. We should not forget that the standards movement came into being because large numbers of *low*-achieving students are not measuring up on basic competencies. Do we want to use the same rationale as the basis for developing programs that are supposed to be qualitatively different?

Many gifted program models are characterized by the kinds of academic freedom that allow for original investigations, the development of creative products, and variations in expressiveness that are designed to meet the diverse and unique needs of gifted students. The very fact that gifted programs have *not* had the kinds of rigid, predetermined curricula that characterize regular education have allowed us to help bright young people investigate complex problems and venture into advanced levels of creative productivity. The academic and artistic strengths and the interests and learning styles of targeted students should be the major rationale for special program opportunities, rather than yet another long list of pre-selected standards that will immediately depersonalize what has been the uniqueness of what we call qualitative

differentiation. Hard on the heels of prescribed standards will come prescribed curriculum that teaches to the standards, and we will judge our effectiveness with nicely correlated standardized tests. We will, in effect, recreate the very educational model from which we have been trying to escape! By so doing, we will turn control of our programs over to bureaucrats and committees far removed from the unique interaction that should take place between and among students and teachers who want to wrestle with an interest-based problem that does not have a canned solution. We will have standardized gifted education!

Let me put this another way. How would you feel if I accused you of trying to “standardize” gifted students? Shouldn’t special program opportunities liberate the mind and the spirit of young people, rather than try to make learning conform to some predetermined standard? Although not jumping on the standards band wagon is counterintuitive to what many may view as common sense, we should remember that the people whom history has deemed to be gifted contributors to the arts and sciences and other walks of human life have always been persons who have *defied* standard ways of doing things.

How then should standards fit into education in general and gifted education in particular? I believe that long lists of standards and the current mania about high-stakes testing have, in effect, become the curriculum, rather than the things that should be the bookends that surround rich intervening experiences. The misuse of standards and tests are based on the mistaken belief that we can *legislate* results by creating list after list of standards and use high-stakes tests as gun-at-the-head enforcers of these standards. Lists of content standards, if applied to gifted education, will turn it into a fancy version of the one-size-fits-all curriculum that gifted education advocates have so desperately tried to escape. And even process standards, if overly specified and taught in a mechanical fashion, can create a pre-determinism about learning that makes both content and process acquisition the ends of learning, rather than means that should be applied to attacking interesting real-world problems.

I am not arguing against the need to develop high-quality sets of standards that serve as broad guides for determining what needs to be taught in general education. But, good standards need to be guided by at least four major considerations. First, standards should be “benchmarked” so that we can define a continuum of curricular proficiency that ranges from basic or minimal competency to advanced levels of accomplishment in both the content and process skills that define a given domain of knowledge. Second, standards developers need to take into account *who* should be responsible for determining what should be taught, what are the long-term consequences of including and excluding particular segments of knowledge from the curriculum, and how to strike an appropriate balance between the depth and breadth of recommended material. Third, standards developers, especially if they have a concern for our most able learners, should give wide laterality to *how* material should be taught. If there is one thing that has contributed to the success of gifted education, that thing surely is the creativity and imaginative pedagogy employed by teachers of the gifted. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, standards developers need to examine carefully the *implications* standards have on the assessment and accountability process. Our track record in similar standardization movements (e.g., behavioral objectives, performance contracts, minimal competency initiatives, and mastery learning) has generally focused the accountability model on those things that are easily measured by objectively scored standardized tests. And we know from experience with these previous

“movements” that their emphasis on prescription usually results in learning that quickly degenerates to acquisition of the most basic skills and factual material. Good standards need to be guided by the above considerations, and they should avoid at all costs simplistic efforts to prescribe curriculum or legislate outcomes.

In the final analysis, the only thing that we can legislate is equality of *opportunity*. All kinds of excellence—intellectual, moral, scientific, technological, artistic, academic, and commercial—will flourish when we make heroic efforts to create greater access to a broad range of superlative opportunities for young people with high potentials. When opportunity is given its due, powerful results and a much broader vision of accountability will become a function of the ways in which individuals make use of the standards, resources, and encouragement that special programs should provide.

Additional reflections on gifted education in the new millennium will be presented in another article that focuses on extracognitive variables that should be considered in the identification process and the need to examine the pedagogy that guides our field. The pedagogy issue interacts with the thoughts about the standards movement discussed above.

References

Fromm, E. (1941). *Escape from freedom*. New York: Rinehart.

Author Note

This essay was based on a conversation with Don Treffinger about the standards issue in gifted education.