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Conceptual, Operational and Policy Issues in Servicing Gifted Students in Mexico

Pedro Sanchez Escobedo*

Pedro Sanchez Escobedo College of Education , Universidad Autónoma de Yucatán, Mexico

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ABSTRACT

This paper reflects upon existing conceptual controversies regarding high ability students in Mexico. A taxonomy of high ability students is proposed with the aim to provide clarity between the categories of talented and gifted students. Differences in services needed in each category are addressed considering implications for teacher training and educational policy. Problems in policies regarding gifted students are analyzed. As a result, arguments on why gifted students should not be classified within the special education services are posited. We argue the importance of independent services for the gifted supported by their own theoretical and methodological framework. Educational policies based upon potential, talent and merit are necessary to foster the human capital of the county. We argue that the effective of screening and intervention of Mexican gifted students is a sound strategy to enhance socioeconomic and scientific development, thus a sound reason to invest in the brilliant minds of our students.

1. Introduction

In Mexico, and perhaps in the Spanish language, there are many confusions in the use of labels to categorize talented and gifted students. The aim of this work is to clarify these terms and concepts for use in elucidating their implications in the field of the gifted education. A distinction between talented, gifted, and high achieving students is the first step to clarify between categories of students that have different educational needs. An efficient and simple taxonomy to identify the educational needs of talented and gifted student is a sound policy for serving them. Thus, in this article we will clarify the nomenclature

for identifying students' high abilities as talented, gifted, or high achieving students.

The term *high ability* has been universally used as a mixture of talents, efforts, and intellectual gifts. This is because of the influence of Renzulli in the early years of gifted education in Mexico, who proposed that gifted and talented individuals conjugate creativity, skills, and task commitment. This definition is so broad it created confusion when categorizing different kinds of students' abilities. This inclusion of a rather broad set of characteristics to consider giftedness has inspired many programs around the world, but it has also created some confusion as to

*Corresponding Author:

Pedro Sanchez Escobedo , Senior Lecturer , College of Education , Universidad Autónoma de Yucatán, Mexico; Email: psanchez@correo.uady.mx.

who is gifted (Sanchez, 2013)^[13]

This paper focus on the conceptual ambiguity and lack of specific guidelines to address gifted students in Mexico and its implications for educational policies and practice.

2. Definition and Classification

In Spanish language educational literature, one encounters inconsistent and changing terms in referring to high ability students. Furthermore, there are several labels that have little value for classification purposes. Sanchez (2003)^[14] argued that some terms must be avoided, such as *prodigious*, referring to those who have extraordinary abilities in a specific field such as arts, sports or memorizing. *Precocious* which refers to children who develop skills earlier, for example, who learn reading and writing at age four. Or *genius* which is a term used for persons noteworthy for their creative or inventive capacity. Other terms must also be avoided such as *outstanding*, *highly able*, and *exceptional* simply because they lack precision to define what are the assets of specific students in each educational setting.

The most used term is *talented* which refers to the ability to master tasks in an exceptional way in one or more fields of activity, like arts or sports. In this sense, the term *talented* refers to the ability or having either a physical or an aesthetic ability, or both. Thus, the potential to excel in arts such as dance, music, poetry etc; or the physical ability to excel the field of sports. In general, it is accepted that a talent is identified if exercise and practice sharpen one or more skills; therefore value is granted to a student through environmental influences either in the family, the school, or the social context (Lizcano & Sánchez-Escobedo, 2016).^[10] Of course, in some cases, talent is still a blurry definition, take for example mastering ballet, typically considered a belle-art, but that requires exceptional physical strength and condition. In this field, both aesthetic and physical abilities are needed to excel.

The problem with the term talent is the inability of servicing these students within Mexican schools. As well as in many other countries, talented individuals require extracurricular activities either in the arts or competitive sports. Special facilities, materials and even unconventional lifestyles are required to foster these talents and educational needs are very often met by curriculum adaptation and specialized educators. Since our focus is servicing cognitive highly able students within the established educational system in Mexico, we do not address talented students in this discussion.

In this perspective, intellectual high ability or giftedness refer to students with high academic potential in school and requires special challenges to avoid boredom and underachievement. The student with high academic potential needs to be differentiated from students with *High Academic Performance*, student who stand out in the school settings because of their effort and good grades. Typically, they have normal intelligence and their performances have placed them in the high percentiles of the grade's score distribution (Camelo, 2018).^[3] In Mexico, teachers need to be aware, that despite the excellent prognosis that high achieving students have for success, the term gifted does not apply to these students.

Thus, high cognitive skills should be considered a sub-category of high abilities that assumes an innate cognitive ability or general intelligence that is independent from sex, economics, race, and location. It is important to point out that the epigenetic aetiology, minimizes environmental influences children are born with is a gift; hence they are referred as *gifted* in the English literature. This argues for the need of intelligence testing that places them above the 97 percentile on the standardized scale. Determining a high 'g-factor' of intelligence is the most consistent and incontrovertible practice to screen for gifted students around the world (Labastida 2014).^[9] Camelo (2018)^[3] asserts: "The key to conception of giftedness should bear in mind the resources which can be used according to the demands that the environment presents. The greater the number of intellectual resources, the greater the probability of adjusting to the demands of the environment" (p.61).

Although many educators have displayed reservations and resistance to accept that schools can't convert any child in gifted, the recognition and acceptance of this fundamental fact makes it easier to understand many of the limitations, prejudices and challenges in servicing the gifted. In Mexico it is important to prevent the abuse and fraud of persons. Institutions of education must be reject the exploitation of dedicated kids whose parents' have enormous expectations by offering magical solution and ways to "promote" giftedness along an extensive financial gain. Table 1 illustrates terms used in hope of clarification and definition of various terms used in a parsimonious way.

The focus of this work is the category of giftedness, students with high cognitive abilities and exceptional intellectual potential. We will discuss further the specific screening, intervention, and policies regarding this specific group of students.

Table 1. Classification of Students with High Abilities

Concept	Domain	Features	Services/intervention
Gifted	Sciences, technology.	High IQ-Intelligence	Acceleration, enrichment etc.
High achieving	School performance	Effort	None
Talented	Sports	Physical abilities	Sports centers, training.
	Arts	Aesthetic potential, creativity	Fine arts, special academies.

3. Identification

In Mexico, systematic screening for gifted students is an infrequent activity, despite the importance which it has for the development of human capital and human resources. Mexican educators have failed to foresee the value of servicing gifted students and to guide and support these children to the highest levels of education. At a national level, there is a lack of standardized methods, instruments, and procedures for screening gifted children. Likewise, there are few specially designed programs and strategies to meet their educational needs (Sánchez, 2006).^[15]

Obviously, this is due to the conceptual controversy in defining who is gifted and the lack of teacher training in this field. In addition, there has been confusing information on who they are and how to serve them. Thus, many programs and activities based on enrichment and directed to all kinds of children has been the trend; instead of using specific proven strategies of intervention (Sanchez-Escobedo, Acle-Tomassini, De Agüero, Jacobo, & Rivera, 2003).^[14]

Classification is the key service required which ensures that program resources are directed to the gifted students are not dispersed. In Mexico, many programs based on small classes and specialized professors were filled with children that were not gifted, not even high achievers. They were children of other teachers and authorities. In sum, materials, and resources for gifted education, were used for remedial or enrichment purposes, perhaps with no harm done, but certainly without purpose and long-term goals for those gifted.

4. Intervention

A simple taxonomy and conceptual clarity about who is gifted is important for effective screening. Intelligence testing should be done in a systemic fashion, particularly in a country in which teacher nomination usually identified high achieving students as gifted (Sánchez-Escobedo, 2006).^[15] Such classification is necessary to rationalize practices in Mexican schools.

We need a simple and practical classification of High ability students because of the educational implications for teachers. For example, high achieving students must be motivated to continue their path to excellence. Talented students should be directed to the specific spaces where their abilities can be fully developed, usually beyond the school in sports centres or academies of art.

Gifted students however, require special attention to keep them challenged within the school system (Colangelo, Assouline, & Gross, 2004).^[5] Labastida (2014)^[9] points out a series of necessary instructional considerations for teachers in Mexican schools.

1. Their learning must be of significance and consequent to their capability.
2. Teaching must be done with diverse methods.
3. The control of learning must be passed in a progressive fashion to the hands of the students.
4. Teaching is not meant to transmit knowledge, but to facilitate the learning process.
5. Students must be active participants.
6. Multi-disciplinary approaches must be considered when designing instructional activities (p.28).

Beyond these tenets useful in the traditional classroom, other scenarios must be considered. Here are the most used actions in educational systems around the world.

4.1. Acceleration

Acceleration has been considered the most cost-efficient intervention (Becker, 2007)^[11] (Gallagher, 2002).^[8] Its main objective is to challenge the intellectual ability of the student. There is evidence on the efficacy of 18 methods of acceleration, among those skipping grades, studying a specific subject in higher grades, self-paced instruction, curriculum compacting, early admission to university etc. The reader can refer to the Davison Institute for further information (<https://www.davisongifted.org/search-database/entry/a10313>). Many prejudices and resistance of teachers to accelerate gifted students were thoroughly addressed in the key publication on this topic *A Nation Deceived* (Colangelo, Assouline, & Gross, 2004)^[5]

4.2 Enrichment

In Mexico, the most used strategy has been the enrichment, historical practiced from the movement of progressive education in North America in the 1920's which proposes to educate outstanding children through a profound education which derived during the cold war into a method of grouping students according to their abilities (Labastida, 2014).

When reviewing the different state and federal programs for gifted students among the most common are additional classes, guided tours, field trips, summer camps, and guided travels short-term enrichment activities. Most of these programs have poor consistency over time.

Enrichment attempts to stimulate students and influence their vocational choices through a wide range of activities. Activities usually aim to promote interest in sciences, technology, or leadership. This is a popular alternative that usually leaves unforgettable memories in participants that attend field tips, summer camps, travels, excursions, and cultural visits among many other activities. In Mexico, many estates have carried about such programs but follow up studies have shown that these programs are usually costly and do not have a significant impact on the students' academic performance and vocational choice (Davis, 2006).^[6]

Additionally, some elite programs have high costs which makes them difficult to maintain. Bigger programs such as NASA, University of California, and the Belin-Blank centre in Iowa have discontinued because of costs and changes in administration. Similar stories can be observed in the participation of competitions, creative festivals and knowledge Olympics.

4.3 Individual Activities

In some cases, schools design some additional activities for gifted students. This is usually carried out by a tutor who designs activities according to the interest and capacity of the student. In addition, these programs may consider independent studying; reduction of classes, pacing instructions faster, and using materials of higher levels. Unfortunately, in Mexico, most of these activities have been reported in an anecdotal fashion and we lack empirical evidence on the use and effectiveness of this approach.

4.4 Grouping

The grouping according to the capabilities in school or special classrooms are more popular in Europe. Students

are carefully selected and cluster by area of expertise (mathematics, languages, etc.) or by level of ability. In those schools there are itinerant teachers, extra work in classes and special seminars (Castanedo, 2006).^[4] This common practice in European countries is not available in Mexico.

4.5 Online Learning

Finally, and because of the pandemic situation. Many online activities have emerged on Mexican websites. One example is *El Centro de Attention al Talento*, a private website directed for gifted students and their parents that offers diagnosis and in intervention of giftedness <http://www.cedat.com.mx/es>. However, no empirical evidence has been collected to assess its impact and influence in gifted children. In addition, services have a rather high cost that not every Mexican family with a gifted child can afford.

5. Policy Issues

There are important policy considerations in servicing the gifted. Two major issues should be discussed, the first has to do with situating services for the gifted in traditional special education services, the second is the lack of a strategic vision in the Mexican state to foster and nourish the intellectual capital of the country.

5.1 Special Education?

The inclusion of services for gifted children in Mexico has met criticism and there is an emerging movement to create a new category of service, specifically for the gifted that encompasses its own theoretical and methodological framework (Valadez, Betancourt, & Zavala, 2012).^[17]

Beyond the simplistic statement of seeing these students in the opposite extremes of intelligence scores in the Gauss curve, the differences in the educational care of gifted and students with disabilities needs to be explicit and evident. On one hand, students with disabilities require special support outside of the classroom depending on the type and level of the disability; they usually require special resources and materials, and the cost of services is generally high. In contrast, gifted students can be advanced within in the same school and they seldom required special materials. They neither present problems with integration; thus, costs are low since the same school infrastructure is used for acceleration. Table 2 summarizes differences between gifted and students with a disability and their educational needs.

Table 2. Comparison of the Needs of Students with Disability

		Needs	
		Disability	Giftedness
Mobility	Relocation of the ground floor for students with disability motive or visual to access those. Adaptation of handrails in the restrooms for students with mobility disabilities. Elimination of physical obstacles (garbage cans, pots and furniture) which limit the freedom of space int the school or classrooms		None
Communication and Information	Adaptation of educational material which respond to the specific needs of each country with certain disabilities students (visual, auditive, intellectual). Elaboration of boards of personal communication		None
Material and technical support	Walking stick, crammer, calculator, magnifying glass, macro types, and others. Perkins machine, abacus ruler, prick, cashier computer adapter. Auditive helpers, visual material, FM system, and others		None
Sites of care	In the school, in special centers, etc.		In the School

From a pedagogic point of view, there also seems to be discrepancies between the purpose of care for gifted students and students with disabilities. Special education services are meant to minimize or eliminate barriers for learning where as services for the gifted focus on fostering their maximum cognitive potential and to avoid the boredom preventing academic failure. (VanTassel-Baska & Stambaugh, T., 2008).^[18]

In Mexico, we need special and independent services for the gifted. We argue that the gifted children should be served by specialized services that can diagnose and select the appropriate intervention for the gifted. Services must employ knowledge and resources to carry out a formal program for gifted students within the school system.

5.2 A Human Capital Perspective

Ostrom, Ahn and Olivares (2003),^[12] posit that human capital is the knowledge and the accumulated abilities in a community of its members in a conscious way, either through education, qualification or experience. Educational policies in Mexico should recognise the strategic value of screening and cultivating the potential of gifted children for the economic, social, technological, and scientific development of the country. These Mexicans represent a form of human capital for the nation, as such it constitutes a portion of the country’s wealth which has been overlooked.

Policies to address the educational needs of gifted students have been successful in many countries because of their impact on the national development. The economic

success of the people, depends on how extensive and effective they can invest themselves (Becker G. S., 2002).^[2] Furthermore, the advancement of science and technology, the preservation of health and the care of the environment depend upon the amount of human capital in a community. Human capital is a fundamental asset in a knowledge-based society .Gallagher (2002)^[8] warned on the cost of having a national public policy which ignores policies to serve the gifted will have a negative impact on the economic and social development of a country. He argues that governments with a vision of the future must foresee strategies for the technical assistance and the preparation of persons in charge to develop talents and substantial funds for the development of human capital must be invested. This continues to be a pending issue in Mexican educational policy.

In Mexico, laws pertaining gifted educations dates to 1993, in which article 41 of the general education act was amended to add attention to high abilities students as follows:

The identification and the educational care of high ability students, the federal educational authority, based in budget availability, must establish the guidelines for the screening and intervention. By using appropriate pedagogic models, and accreditation mechanisms. Every educational institution in the country should abide to such guidelines. (added paragraph DOF 22-06-2009).

However, such general guidelines have not been translated into specific programs and there is a need to develop a policy that funnels services for the gifted. An independ-

ent entity to oversee services for the gifted is needed. Operational and specific criteria for gifted program must be set to overcome the flows generated by insofar ambiguous educational policies (Labastida, 2014).^[9]

In creating policies to foster talent and human capital, one must recognize the fact that gifted children are not as common as children with disabilities or learning difficulties. However, their attention deserves state support and recognition of their intellectual potential.

Policies based on egalitarianism maintain that students must have the same opportunities and privileges, this position should consider the educational challenges of gifted children (Márquez, 2010).^[11] Meritocracy and the recognition of the exceptional intellectual potential in a child should not conflict with visions of social justice and egalitarian trends (Tomilson, 2008).^[16]

6. Conclusions

The conceptualization of high abilities and talented students in Mexico has been discussed for the purpose of establishing conceptual clarity for an effective policy to address gifted. High achieving and Talented students have been distinguished from those gifted in search of a simple but pragmatic taxonomy of High abilities.

Differences between students with disabilities and high cognitive ability has been discussed. The fact that educational services for special needs have historically been organized according to types of disabilities or abilities of students, does not imply that this should be done in the future, particularly in the light of what is now known about teaching strategies and value of gifted students (Florian, 2010)^[7]

Educational services for gifted students are different than those needed for students with disabilities. Hence, services for the gifted should follow empirically proven intervention methods and stand alone with the freedom to use their procedures for the successful development of these Mexicans' full potential. These students constitute part of the country's strategic human capital, and they warrant specific educational policies that deliver recognition and support.

Mexico's human capital should be expanded by screening and serving gifted students. In sum, we must invest hopes in the brilliant minds in our school system. For this, we need services, policies, and teacher training in this field.

We need to rethink the education of the gifted in Mexico. We need national policies and conceptual clarity to serve gifted students under conviction that they are in a unique position to help solve some of the world's most pressing problems (Webb & Gore, 2011).^[19]

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