Inclusive education for students who are gifted: A call for transformational school reform

Susan Prior

Background

Most students who are gifted are in mainstream classrooms, most of the time (Taylor, 2016) in regular schools. We know these classrooms also include students with disabilities, students who speak languages other than English, and those with other exceptionalities including a combination of all the above. This student diversity is now normal and results in a wide range of curriculum expertise levels in one room, under the responsibility of usually one classroom teacher. This student diversity means that teachers must differentiate the curriculum if they are to meet these wide-ranging learning needs. Teachers may use multiple means of doing so, however research in differentiation has shown that when teachers do differentiate, they tend focus on those students who are struggling (Freedberg et al., 2019; Henderson & Jarvis 2016; Jolly, 2015; Walsh & Jolly, 2018) so may not consider students who are gifted.

So, what does the inclusive education literature recommend for inclusive classrooms and students who are gifted? Have other interests hijacked inclusive education? Does inclusion really mean whole school approaches to include "each and every student"?

Inclusive Education

Inclusive education, in research and school reforms worldwide over the last 30 years, is a contested field without a universally accepted definition, theory, or model of practice (Borders et al., 2014; Jarvis et al., 2020; Slee, 2018). Key policy dilemmas in inclusive education include, "clarifying the overall purpose of inclusive education in context and defining, what we mean, who is included, and into what" (Opertti et al., 2013, p. 166) which has led to a gap between the policy and practice of inclusive education (Ainscow & Sandill, 2010; Carrington & Elkins, 2002; Graham et al., 2021; Haug, 2017; Kinsella, 2020). This is especially true where there has been little research on giftedness and inclusive education and the needs of gifted students are not being met in schools (Davis et al., 2011; Lo & Porath, 2017; Persson, 2010; Prior, 2011; Rimm et al., 2018; Rogers, 2002; Smith, 2006; van Gerven, 2021) because they are absent from the current inclusive education discourse.

Classroom teachers without the necessary skills to address the needs of students who are gifted, means students who are gifted may not identified, provided, or planned for, which is why students who are gifted must be included in inclusive education. The research on diverse students who are gifted almost reverses all conceptions of inclusive education used for students with disability in terms of place and provision (Callaghan et al., 2020) so may conflict with the disability focus of the current inclusive education narrative. Yet, diverse students who are gifted may also have disabilities. Students who are gifted can be found in all socio-economic areas, including disadvantaged backgrounds (Tirri & Laine, 2017), in mainstream, special, and gifted education, yet may be the most marginalised students in inclusive education (Kanevksy, 2011; Merrotsy, 2013) which may seem counterintuitive in the usual inclusive education discourse.

The inclusive education issue hits us close to home in Queensland which has an inclusive education policy and mentions students who are gifted as a cohort, but now has no policy on gifted education.

Queensland

The Queensland (Qld) government abandoned its Gifted Education Framework Policy in 2020, so even though there is an inclusive education policy, there is no longer guidance on the personalized or whole school support system needs of students who are gifted (Anderson & Boyle, 2015) which means Qld state schools have been left to decide how to include students who are gifted. In terms of implementation of inclusive education, here is the checklist from the Qld Department of Education website.

Implementation

The department's work towards a more inclusive state education system is guided by nine principles adapted from the United Nations' nine core features for inclusive education:

- A system-wide approach
- Committed leaders
- Whole of school
- Collaboration with students, families and the community
- Respecting and valuing diversity
- Confident, skilled and capable workforce
- Accessible learning environments
- Effective transitions
- Monitoring and evaluation

Further information regarding these principles and how we are supporting every student to succeed is available on our inclusive education website.

Also, according to the Qld department's website, "As different student groups experience *different barriers to inclusion*, the department will continue to implement *strategies and policies, and support practices* that address the unique needs of:

- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students
- students from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds
- students who identify as LGBTIQ
- students living in out-of-home care
- students from rural and remote communities
- students with disability
- students with mental health needs
- gifted and talented students

https://education.qld.gov.au/student/inclusive-education/Documents/policy-statement-booklet.pdf

The Education department does not explain why students who are gifted and those who are ATSI are not described as students first in this list, when all other cohorts are, or why there is currently no policy for students who are gifted. This is of concern as Jolly (2021) elaborates that whether gifted education policy is present or absent, it indicates the level of support for students who are gifted.

At the federal government level and according to the Australian Curriculum and Reporting Authority (ACARA, n.d.) "students who are gifted do not always excel at school and teaching adjustments should comprise elements of any or all the following: faster pace, greater breadth, and more depth." There is, however, no reference or guidance from ACARA or the Australian Institute for Teaching and Leadership (AITSL) on whole school inclusive approaches and how to include students who are gifted. So, what is a school to do to be inclusive for each student including those who are gifted?

Global Perspective: The United Nations

"Inclusion involves a process of systemic reform embodying changes and modifications in content, teaching methods, approaches, structures, and strategies in education to overcome barriers with a vision serving to provide all students of the relevant age range with an equitable and participatory learning experience and environment that best corresponds to their requirements and preference." (UNCRPD General Comment 4, 2006, p.4.)

Now, with an increased focus on *quality education for all*, where "every learner matters and matters equally" (UNESCO, 2017, p.12) what seems to be missing is the focus on *each* student, and the discrete, explicit detail or "competencies to understand, embrace, and support the diversity of learners' profiles" (Opertti et al., 2014, p.149). In this case the profiles of students who are gifted. So, I reiterate, what is a school to do to be inclusive for each student including those who are gifted? According to the United Nations, inclusive education is, "a process of strengthening the capacity of the education system to reach out to all learners" (UNESCO, 2017, p. 6), so considering whole school approaches may be a step towards achieving this aim.

Whole school Multi-Tiered Systems of Support (MTSS)

An emerging contribution to inclusive education (Sailor, et al., 2021) is the whole school system, Multi-Tiered System of Support (MTSS) which combines the earlier *Response to Intervention* (RTI), *Universal Design for Learning* (UDL) and *Positive Behaviour Interventions and Supports* (PBIS) models into an overarching academic and behavioural approach within an inclusive whole school system. Inclusive, whole school tiered systems of support such as MTSS are still a new concept and some of the MTSS research discusses inclusion, but without mention of students who are gifted (Cusumano et al., 2014).
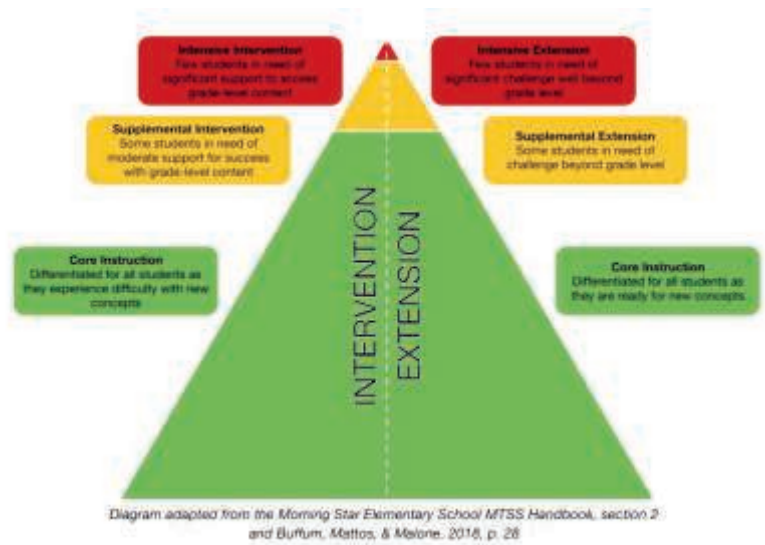
RTI was based on research into effective interventions for students with learning disabilities as an alternative to the traditional IQ-discrepancy approach and one size fit all interventions, but was not considered well defined for mainstream education or indeed other disabilities at the time (Sugai & Horner, 2009). RTI has expanded into a multistep or tiered approach based on whole school procedures for all students including screening, progress monitoring, tiered levels of intervention, and data-based decision making, like public health models. UDL is the universal approach to proactively plan for the instructional environmental and technology supports for students with diverse learning needs (Basham et al., 2010).

MTSS is the umbrella for these approaches, systematically bringing together RTI, the parallel model for behaviour of PBIS, the curriculum approach of UDL and the whole school reforms needed to implement such change inclusive of professional development, and school improvement initiatives (Mellard et al., 2017). This whole school approach requires clear commitment to being systematic and inclusive for diverse students over time in the school.

However, MTSS has not yet been universally adopted across states or countries and tiers of support need to be systematic and carefully

personalised in order to be effective (Waitoller & Thorius, 2015). Similarly, teachers and schools may not be prepared to implement whole school support systems (Redenius & Skaar, 2017) which need to be systematic and planned for including training of staff. Its transformational when achieved.

Some states in the USA have adopted MTSS with documents which include guidance on students who are gifted, but it is early days yet. Several school document graphic examples are included below as a way of demonstrating how a system might include students who are gifted in their levels of support

Diagram adapted from the Morning Star Elementary School MTSS Handbook, section 2 and Buffum, Mattos, & Malone, 2018, p. 26

Morning Star Elementary *https://ms.bsd7.org/parents/multi-_tiered_system_of_support*

processes.

ELK River USA *https://www.isd728.org/domain/154*

PREVENTION for all Students

ENRICHMENT for all Students

INTERVENTION for all Students

Multi Tiered Systems of Support
(MTSS)
All Children | Whole Child

Parent Engagement

Curriculum Design

Teamwork

Postsecondary Goals

School / Community Collaboration

Professional Development

Texas Education Service Center Region11 *https://www.esc11.net/Page/8512*

This is a call for transformational school reform that fully integrates academic behavioural social and emotional interventions for all students in an inclusive education environment (McIntosh & Goodman, 2016). Another way of looking at this dilemma is if inclusion "represents an approach that looks into how to transform education systems to respond to the diversity of learners" (Ninkov, 2020, p.286) then students who are gifted must be included in that system. When evaluating inclusive education for students who are gifted, we need to use an inclusive education orientation, operationalise differentiation, and challenge the barriers to inclusive education. The question here is, according to Callaghan et al., (2020) does inclusive education help gifted students so they each flourish?

Susan Prior Bio

Sue Prior is the Lead education consultant at Prior learning. Sue's main point of difference in the field is she is a highly qualified and experienced educator registered with the Queensland College of Teachers (QCoT) with extensive practical experience as a school consultant for over 130 schools in Brisbane and students who are gifted. So, she understands and listens to what teachers need to help students who are gifted thrive and assist schools to develop inclusive systems to support them. Sue also supports parents to collaborate with schools to develop practical learning profiles and plans for students who are gifted and/or experiencing twice exceptionality. With international teaching experience in Hong Kong and Bangkok Sue has won teaching awards and travel scholarships to present her research and practice in gifted education. You can find copies of Sue's published academic papers on Academia, Google Scholar and ResearchGate ***www.priorlearning.com.au***

References

Ainscow, M., & Sandhill, A. (2010). Developing inclusive education systems: The role of organisational cultures and leadership. *International Journal of Inclusive Education*, *14*(4), 401-416.

Anderson, J., & Boyle, C. (2015). Inclusive education in Australia: Rhetoric, reality, and the road ahead. *Support for Learning, 30*(1), 4–22. ***https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-***

Borders, C., Woodley, S. & Moore, E. (2014), Inclusion and Giftedness, in *Gifted Education: Current Perspectives and Issues Advances in Special Education, 26*, Emerald Group Publishing Limited, Bingley, pp. 121-46.

Callahan, C. M., Plucker, J. A., Gluck, S., & Rodriguez, C. (2020). Inclusion of academically advanced (gifted) students. In *On Educational Inclusion* (pp. 176-194). Routledge.

Carrington, S., & Elkins, J. (2002). Bridging the gap between inclusive policy and inclusive culture in secondary schools. *Support for Learning, 17*(2), 51–57.

Davis, G. A., Rimm, S. B. & Siegle, D. (2011). *Education of the gifted and talented* (6th ed.). Boston Pearson.

Education Queensland. (2005, 2021). *Inclusive education policy statement*. Brisbane Queensland. ***https://ppr.qed.qld.gov.au/pp/inclusive-education-policy***

Freedberg, S., Bondie, R., Zusho, A., & Allison, C. (2019). Challenging students with high abilities in inclusive math and science classrooms, *High Ability Studies*, 30:1-2, 237 254, DOI: ***10.1080/13598139.2019.1568185***

Graham, L. J., De Bruin, K., Lassig, C., & Spandagou, I. (2021). A scoping review of 20 years of research on differentiation: investigating conceptualisation, characteristics, and methods used. *Review of Education*, *9*(1), 161-198.

Haug, P. (2017). Undertaking inclusive education: ideals and reality. *Scandinavian Journal of Disability, 19*(3), 206-217. ***http://doi.org/10.1080/15017419.2016.1224778***

Henderson, L., & Jarvis, J. (2016). The gifted dimension of the Australian professional standards for teachers: Implications for professional Learning. *Australian Journal of Teacher Education*, 41(8). http://dx.doi.org/10.14221/ajte.2016v41n8.4

Jarvis, J. M., McMillan, J. M., Bissaker, K., Carson, K. L., Davidson, J., & Walker, P. M. (2020). *Inclusive School Communities Project: Final Evaluation Report* Research in Inclusive and Specialised Education (RISE), Flinders University.

Jolly, J. L. (2015). Historical perspectives: The gifted at risk. *Gifted Child Today*, *38*(2), 12 127.

Jolly, J. L., & Robins, J. H. (2021). Australian gifted and talented education: An analysis of government policies. *Australian Journal of Teacher Education (Online)*, *46*(8), 70-95.

Kanevksy, L. (2011). Deferential differentiation: What types of differentiation do students want? *Gifted Child Quarterly*, *55*(4), 279-299.

Kinsella, W. (2020). Organising inclusive schools. *International Journal of Inclusive Education, 24*(12), 1340–1356. ***https://doi.org/10.1080/13603116.2018.151682***

Lo, C. O., & Porath, M. (2017). Paradigm shifts in gifted education: An examination vis-à-vis its historical situatedness and pedagogical sensibilies. *Gifted Child Quarterly*, *61*(4), 343-360.

Merrotsy, P. (2013). Invisible gifted students. *Talent Development & Excellence*, *5*(2), 31-42.

Ninkov, I. (2020). Education Policies for Gifted Children Within a Human Rights Paradigm: a Comparative Analysis. *Journal of Human Rights and Social Work*, *5*(4), 280-289.

Opertti, R., Walker, Z., & Zhang, Y. (2013). Inclusive education: From targeting groups and schools to achieving quality education as the core of EFA. *The SAGE Handbook of Special Education: Two Volume Set*, *1*, 149.

Persson, R. S. (2010). Experiences of intellectually gifted students in an egalitarian and inclusive educational system: A survey study. *Journal for the Education of the Gifted*, *33*(4), 536-569.

Prior, S. (2011). Student voice: What do students who are intellectually gifted say they experience and need in the inclusive classroom? *Gifted and Talented International, 26*(1-2), 121-129, ***DOI: 10.1080/15332276.2011.11673596***

Rimm, S.B., Siegle, D., & Davis, G.A. (2018). *Education of the Gifted and Talented.* New Jersey: Pearson Education.

Rogers, K. *(2002.) Re-forming gifted education: Matching the program to the child*. Great Potential Press, Inc.

Slee, R. (2018). Inclusive Education isn't Dead, it Just Smells Funny (1st ed.). Routledge.

Smith, C. M. (Ed.). (2006). *Including the gifted and talented: Making inclusion work for more gifted and able learners*. Taylor & Francis.

Taylor, T. (2016). Gifted students: Perceptions and practices of regular class teachers. (Doctoral Dissertation Edith Cowan University) ***https://ro.ecu.edu.au/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=2934&context=theses***

Tirri, K. & Laine, S. (2017), Ethical challenges in inclusive education: The case of gifted students, In *Ethics, Equity, and Inclusive Education* (*International Perspectives on Inclusive Education, Vol. 9*), Emerald Publishing Limited, Bingley, pp. 239- 257. /doi.org/10.1108/S1479-363620170000009010

United Nations Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD), *comment No.4* (2016*), Article 24: Right to inclusive education* available at: ***https://www.refworld.org/docid/57c977e34.html***

UNESCO, (2017). *A Guide for Ensuring Inclusion and Equity in Education*. Paris ***http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0024/002482/248254e.pdf***