

# The Gift of the Magi

*Most “gifted” programs do not develop their students’ special abilities.*

By Susan Smethurst

A new study by the Institute for Social Research at York University examined the performance of 513 York University students from gifted curricula, regular high school backgrounds and private schools as they made their way through undergraduate studies. The study found that being in a gifted program in high school does not guarantee a student greater success in university.

When “gifted” programs were developed in my area, I was assigned to teach in them for several years, at both junior and intermediate grade levels. I found that there was a deep division — impassable chasm is more like it — between those who preferred an “advancement” model for gifted education and those who preferred an “enrichment” model.

Of course, these two schools of thought overlap somewhat (everybody is in favour of an enriching, challenging curriculum). But the main emphases are not compatible.

The *advancement* school emphasizes (as the name suggests) academically-advanced work. Students are encouraged to progress rapidly in areas such as mathematics, science and music; they may read material and do writing assignments that would be considered well beyond what would normally be expected for their age or grade. This can mean that they complete high school early, or enter university with advanced standing, or take correspondence courses at the university level while still in secondary school, or other variations.

The advancement school of thought is not highly regarded in many educational circles, however. It is felt that the child’s social and emotional development is jeopardized by emphasizing academic development far beyond chronological age and that there is ample time later for advanced work when the child reaches the post-secondary level.

The *enrichment* school emphasizes extending the student’s learning beyond what is usually required for the grade. Thus, additional topics may be included and, in theory at least, higher-order thinking skills (synthesis, evaluation, etc.) are to be stressed instead of rote learning and recall. Research skills or data collection and analysis may be a focus. Sometimes, the work in the enrichment program extends work from the student’s regular program and sometimes it is entirely separate. The enrichment model is considered more inclusive and less discriminatory, as it allows for a broader definition of giftedness — for example, it may not require a specific IQ cutoff. (Some boards do not even ascertain their students’ IQ!)

At the time I was teaching the gifted program, the “Renzulli” model was used to identify gifted children. They had to demonstrate **above average** (not necessarily outstanding) academic achievement, **creativity** and **task commitment**. The specifications for what the program entailed were rather vague. I tried to pin down my superiors as to whether we were offering advancement or enrichment (parents asked ME!), but I could never get a straight answer.

Although I found the students challenging and rewarding to work with, I personally dislike situations that are *too* open-ended, and I opted out of the gifted program after several years. Even though I could never get a straight answer, I would have to say that most programs I knew of or participated in were mostly of the enrichment type.

It might be difficult to find enough advancement model gifted programs to do a comparison study, but I think if one were done it would show a difference in outcomes. I have to admit bias myself, as I was fortunate enough to be

enrolled in an advancement model program when I was in the junior and intermediate grades. Though there was still plenty of uninspired classroom activity, it was vastly preferable to my earlier experiences such as being sent to the office for reading *Animal Farm* in grade 2.

The only drawback for kids in an advancement program is that they may find university courses too easy at first. I know I was amazed to be presented with assignments that were easier than work I had done in grade 7. But the upper-level courses were challenging enough; so that was an ephemeral problem!

To be fair, I should point out that enrichment programs certainly do serve a purpose and fill a real need: they engage students who may have become bored, socially-isolated, behaviour problems or lazy, and the opportunity to interact with other children like themselves is for the students the biggest benefit of all. Nevertheless, since most teacher do not have a clear mandate to teach these students a rigorous academically-focused program, it does not surprise me that they have no apparent advantage in university.

Academically-gifted students *do* need and deserve programs to develop their special abilities, abilities which we as a society cannot afford to squander. The cost is minimal and the results could probably be documented, but we need to differentiate between enrichment — which all students need and deserve — and advancement — which a few students need, indeed crave, just as much as learning-disabled or developmentally-delayed children need programs suited to them.

*(Ms. Smethurst currently teaches disadvantaged students in Toronto. In her spare time, she trains, breeds and competes in performance events with Shetland Sheepdogs from her “pet paradise” in Flamborough.)*