

# School-Within-a-School Gifted Programs

## Perceptions of Students and Teachers in Public Secondary Schools

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**Abstract:** The authors conduct open-ended surveys of 530 students and teachers in three publicly funded schools with different approaches to providing a high-ability “school-within-a-school”: a gifted program, an international baccalaureate program, and a high-ability program with a science focus. Overall, the authors find that teachers and students in all of these gifted programs express strong satisfaction with their academic programs. At the same time, however, all groups (students and teachers in gifted and regular programs at all three schools) express concerns about the relationship between the special gifted programs and the schools within which they are housed. Based on an analysis of stakeholders’ concerns and suggestions in the contexts of the different schools’ approaches to integration, suggestions are made for and questions are raised about fostering a positive school climate in secondary schools that offer programming for high-ability learners.

**Putting the Research to Use:** One of the most urgent challenges within the field of gifted education is to resolve the apparent conflict between meeting the special learning needs of gifted students and promoting social equity. Exceptionally able learners have special needs that cannot be met without differentiating the pace, depth, and complexity of the educational programming normally offered at the student’s age and grade level. At the same time, however, these students must coexist with others, and it is best for everyone if the coexistence is experienced as mutually beneficial rather than as antagonistic and elitist.

A school-within-a-school approach is one way to provide both specialized gifted programming and also opportunities for exceptionally capable learners to interact with the general school population in ways that can be mutually enriching. Our results confirm earlier findings that when high-ability programs are housed in larger schools, educators need to pay attention to the relationships that are so established and work proactively toward (a) transparency and communication; (b) flexible access to gifted programs; (c) equitable access to equipment, facilities, and field trips; (d) awareness of misconceptions and stereotypes; and (e) recognition of diverse pathways to excellence and achievement.

Because the programs studied here are exemplary in many important ways, this study also raises the question of the inevitability of resentment to congregated programs, as suggested by several current analyses (Borland, 2003b; Callahan, 2003; Ford, 2003). Our findings highlight the need for educators who are concerned with exceptionally capable learners to continue to consider effective approaches that will “allow idiosyncratic learners to thrive” (in the words of one of our teacher respondents), while simultaneously minimizing misconceptions, prejudices, and perceptions of elitism.

**Keywords:** *school-within-a-school gifted programs; high school gifted; secondary school gifted programming; students’ perceptions; teachers’ perceptions; international baccalaureate; science gifted; school climate; equity and excellence; transparency and communication; flexible program access; equitable access; misconceptions and stereotypes*

One model of gifted education is the “school-within-a-school” approach, where special programs are provided for high-ability students who take most of their course credits as a specialized cohort, thereby creating

the feeling of a small and cohesive multi-grade-level school within a larger school. The school-within-a-school model has been described as providing exceptionally able students with the higher level of complexity

that they require intellectually and the daily interactions with intellectual peers that they require socially, while also integrating them into the wider community (Clark, 1997). Other observers, however, have noted that segregated gifted programming can create or exacerbate problems of equity and elitism (Borland, 2003b; Ford, 2003). Recognizing the validity of both points of view, we sought to investigate students' and teachers' perceptions of special gifted programs at the high school level, including whether those in the special program feel isolated from the larger school community and whether there is the widespread perception of "haves" and "have-nots" that has been documented elsewhere (Callahan, 2003). We wanted to find out what works and what doesn't from the standpoints of students and teachers.

## Background: A Review of the Literature

### School-Within-A-School Model

The school-within-a-school model was initially developed by general educators "seeking new models to improve their schools" (Deweese, 1999). They based their advocacy of such programs on evidence suggesting that academic achievement and student well-being are higher in smaller schools (Howley & Bickel, 2000; Lee & Smith, 1995). There are many variations of this model, ranging from special programs with close linkages to the larger school to separate small schools housed within larger schools, with their own staff and separate budgets, and procedures for reporting directly to district officials (Raywid, 1995).

Schools-within-schools are particularly attractive to people seeking specialized education not available through the normal school structure or standard curriculum (McAndrews & Anderson, 2002). This certainly describes many advocates of gifted education who are concerned that activities in regular classrooms

are not differentiated to address the needs of advanced learners (Moon & Rosselli, 2000). This concern is supported by evidence that gifted and talented students show marked academic gains and moderate increases in attitude toward academic subjects when grouped together for the majority of the day (Delcourt, Loyd, Cornell, & Goldberg, 1994; Kulik, 2003; Rogers, 1991). In addition, the school-within-a-school model offers a way to address the learning needs of high-ability students while it provides access to the resources and diversity of a larger school.

Specialized schools-within-schools are often created by large urban schools seeking to attract strong academic students (Borland, 2003a; Sapon-Shevin, 1994). It is not always easy, however, to balance the needs of the smaller school with the larger school in which it is housed. As Raywid (1985) writes, "the major challenge to schools-within-schools has been obtaining sufficient separateness and autonomy to permit staff members to generate a distinctive environment and to carry out their own vision of schooling" (p. 455). Although evidence indicates that administrative separation may be beneficial to students in the smaller school, the literature does not identify such benefits for students in the larger school. Indeed, the research suggests that there can be many disadvantages to the larger school. These include fractured relationships, rivalries, inequitable tracking, and diminished school coherence (Deweese, 1999).

Some critics charge that such programs for the gifted tend to exclude minority students and are used politically as a means of stemming White flight. As Sapon-Shevin (1994) writes, "by providing segregated programming for 'gifted students,' some white parents—those with children in the gifted program—will remain in the district" (p. 35). Certainly, there is considerable evidence of underrepresentation of minority students in gifted programs (Ford, 2003; Robinson, 2003). One researcher noted that when his child was enrolled in a gifted school-within-a-school, "one rarely had any difficulty determining, even at a distance, whether a particular group of children from that school was in the gifted program or the 'regular school'" (Borland, 2003b, p. 117).

Even when there are not differences in the racial composition of students between programs within a school, there can be tensions when one program in a school is considered to be elite. Critics have long argued that it is unfair to devote additional resources to already-privileged groups such as gifted learners when there are greater needs both in the mainstream population and among students at risk (Oakes, 1985).

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Sapon-Shevin (2003) goes further, suggesting that participants in the system have been socialized “to accept that such differentiation is inevitable, desirable, or at minimum, not subject to discussion” (p. 134).

Possible problems with the school-within-a-school model were dramatically conveyed in a front-page article in *The New York Times* on April 11, 2004, in which Elissa Gootman raised important questions as she described the small Bronx Aerospace Academy, housed within the much larger Evander Childs High School. She identified frictions such as Evander Childs students teasing Bronx Aerospace students, disrupting their classes, and inciting physical incidents. Gootman documented teachers’ concerns as well as students’, including perceived disparities in privilege, public attention, and resources. As New York City remained committed to creating “small learning communities,” *The New York Times* ran a series of articles on small schools, identifying concerns being expressed by individuals in the larger schools that house them (Herszenhorn, 2005).

### **Tensions Between Excellence and Egalitarianism**

Underlying much of the debate regarding gifted schools-within-schools has been the ongoing tension between conceptions of excellence and egalitarianism in Western society from the beginning of public education. “Egalitarianism and excellence emerged as ideals to be preserved, even though they have always been counterpoised and resistant to reconciliation,” writes Tannenbaum (2000, p. 31). Reconciling these apparently competing educational ideals has long been a troubling challenge to educators, and of course gifted education acts as a flashpoint for this debate. Conant (1946) expressed this as a tension between “discovering and giving opportunity to the gifted student” and “raising the level of the average student” (p. 27). Futerman (1989) worried that the special learning needs of the gifted would be ignored if equality were overemphasized. He asked, “How do we foster excellence and yet maintain equality” (p. xii)? Gardner (1961) feared “the end of striving for excellence, which has produced mankind’s greatest achievements” (p. 15).

Others frame the debate as a sometimes-confusing juxtaposition between equal outcome and equal opportunity conceptions of education. Although quite different in their focus, these conceptions are easily conflated because both focus on addressing educational needs related to diversity in our publicly funded

schools. Outcome egalitarians believe that public education ought to equalize student outcomes, usually focusing on raising standards for the poorest performers and depicting high-ability students as requiring no special educational attention. Proponents of equal opportunity, on the other hand, focus on providing meaningful learning opportunities for all students (Moon & Rosselli, 2000). The equal opportunity position conceptualizes giftedness as only one of several exceptionalities (along with learning disabilities, sensory impairments, etc.) that require curriculum differentiation if all children are to have equitable opportunities to learn within a large public education system.

Many advocates of gifted education acknowledge that elitism persists as an issue. McLeod and Cropley (1989), while claiming that gifted programs are not elitist, suggest that by tending to favor students of high social or economic status, such programs often induce envy in the less advantaged. Although Donna Ford is a strong proponent of gifted programming, she sees the field of gifted education as “rife with inequities, particularly with regard to providing equitable educational opportunities for students of color” (Ford, 2003, p. 143).

### **Teen Culture**

Teen culture is another important consideration when considering the school-within-a-school approach to gifted programming. Prevailing adolescent attitudes influence perceptions of students in special programs by those outside the program, as well as the self-perceptions of participants in such programs, and so contribute to shaping the school environment. Studies of school ecologies, such as Milner’s (2004) *Freaks, Geeks, and Cool Kids*, provide rich sources of information on teenage dynamics and lead to such questions as the following: Are disparaging comments about gifted students related to the existence of a special program? Or are they merely reflections of a teen culture in which “nerds’ who are openly preoccupied with academic success” are normally close to the bottom rung of the teenage status ladder anyway (p. 41)? Are academically focused students identified as “uncool” for accepting “conventions and authority structures” (Milner, 2004, p. 59), just by virtue of their being in a special program, or would they be labelled as “uncool” regardless of program affiliation? Is the tendency for self-containment among gifted students any different than that of members of school bands, for whom “the combination of ritualized

activities that increase solidarity, and the low regard of other students, motivates the creation of a counter-culture that extols alternative values to those of more popular groups” (Milner, 2004, p. 77)? Regardless of whether a special program carries an elite label, it is an open question as to what extent teachers and administrators can foster constructive student interaction across groups that typically see themselves as disparate regardless of the structure of the school (Reinke & Herman, 2002).

### **Listening to Diverse Stakeholders’ Voices**

Our search of the research literature evaluating school-within-a-school programs for gifted learners yielded only one report, by Rogers (1991), who considered effect sizes of various approaches to gifted programming, including the school-within-a-school. Although Rogers did find a significant positive effect of this approach on students’ learning, her evaluation did not address the various stakeholders’ perceptions of their school experience.

In the gifted education literature generally, it is not easy to find the voices of teachers and students who are participating in gifted programming. It is even harder to find the voices of those who are adjacent to gifted programming but who are not participating in it directly themselves. In a study of evaluation reports on gifted programs, Callahan (2000) found that far too often, these voices were absent and in fact that “the questions, data collection, and recommendations were directed primarily toward administrator concerns” (p. 539). She emphasized the importance of including everyone in the school, not just those participating in the gifted programming. It is important to listen to the voices of all those within the school community to get as holistic a sense as possible of the ecological impact of a gifted school-within-a-school. This perspective was also expressed by Borland (2003a), who observed that evaluation of gifted programs should consider the program within the broader setting in which it operates, including considering “relationships between the gifted program and other programs, gifted program faculty and other faculty; gifted students and other students, school, and parents.” (p. 304).

### **Research Questions**

This project was driven by a desire to know more about participants’ perceptions of their gifted school-within-a-school experience, in the larger context of considering optimal ways to challenge high-ability learners. Our research questions were as follows:

What is the nature of the experience of students and teachers in schools with a special gifted program that operates as a school-within-a-school from the standpoint of those participating in the program as well as those excluded from it? How do students experience the gifted program? How do teachers experience the program?

## **Method**

### **Participants**

We selected a case study approach as the best design for our interests (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998; Merriam, 1997; Ragin & Becker, 1992) and designated as cases three schools housing high-ability school-within-a-school programs in a large Canadian city—schools that we are calling here Maple Heights, Sprucedale, and Pineview. Each program has highly competitive admissions standards, is considered exemplary in many ways, and appears to be well integrated into its host school, lacking the isolation and overt tensions evident in many other studies of the school-within-a-school model (e.g., Donovan & Cross, 2002; Sapon-Shevin, 2003).

The administrative structure for each of the selected special programs is minimal, with fiscal and administrative responsibilities in the hands of the school principal (and not the program coordinator). Nonetheless, each of the special programs has considerable autonomy, and the students in these programs appear to have a strong affiliation with their special program. The school-within-a-school programs at Maple Heights, Sprucedale, and Pineview appear to be model programs whose gifted students coexist peacefully with other students within effectively administered schools. Each school also offers other kinds of specialized programs (e.g., special education, English as a second language, and technical studies), generally encouraging equal opportunity cultures by respecting individual developmental diversity of many kinds.

Individual participants in the study were recruited by virtue of their involvement in the categories under study as well as by being students or teachers in classes with participating teacher candidates (student teachers working with us). All students in participating classes were given a copy of a research information sheet outlining the nature of the study and their right to participate or to decline with no personal consequences.

*Maple Heights Secondary School (Gifted).* Maple Heights Secondary School is a socioeconomically

**Table 1**  
**Description of the Cases**

Name	School <i>n</i>	High-Ability <i>n</i> (% of School <i>n</i> )	Special Program	Extent	Admissions Criteria
Maple Heights	2,000	450 (23%)	Gifted	Academic courses, Grades 9 to 11; AP	IQ 130+
Sprucedale	1,900	240 (13%)	Science	Academic courses, Grades 9 to 11; AP,	Math and science exam scores, teacher recommendations, research, school grades, and essay
Pineview	1,200	250 (21%)	International baccalaureate (IB)	Grades 9 to 12	> 80% in pre-IB

Note: AP = Advanced Placement.

diverse school of about 2,000 students that offers a wide range of courses that are offered at the basic, applied, and academic (university-bound) levels. It offers several special programs that focus on the arts, technological studies, and various aspects of special education, including deaf and hard-of-hearing, learning disabilities, and gifted, with the 450 students in the gifted program composing about 23% of the school population (see Table 1). The gifted program, introduced in the 1970s, includes courses in all academic subject areas from Grades 9 through 11, with students taking Grade 12 in the regular program, mostly at the academic (top) level, as well as Advanced Placement courses. Students are formally identified as gifted through a testing process that has changed somewhat through the years and now includes student attainment of at least a 98th percentile score (130 and higher) on the Wechsler Intelligence Scale for Children (5th ed.).

Maple Heights students who have been identified as gifted can choose to take as few or as many courses as they wish in the gifted program. A highlight of the program is its provision of interdisciplinary courses that use the school's state-of-the-art technical, business, and academic facilities. Students can select from interdisciplinary streams in science and technology, communications, and design. This model of gifted education, with a flexible program, interdisciplinary focus, and a half-time coordinator to support staff and students, has proven very successful in many important ways (Matthews & Smyth, 2000). Yet like many special education and gifted programs today, it is facing challenges because of fiscal constraints and loss of staff (Jordan, 2000; Matthews & Smyth, 2000).

To an outside observer, Maple Heights's gifted program appears to be well integrated into the larger

school setting. It is not housed in a separate section of the building, and efforts are made to develop bonds between the gifted students and the overall student body, primarily in extracurricular activities. There have also been efforts to ensure a high level of integration among teachers, in that most teachers of gifted courses teach more than half their time in the regular program.

*Sprucedale Secondary School (science enrichment).* Sprucedale Secondary School has about 1,900 students (see Table 1). It includes a large population of recent immigrants from the Middle East and South Asia, whose families are economically challenged but are highly educated. In addition to the science enrichment program, it also houses special education, cooperative education, and English as a Second Language programs. Here, as at Maple Heights, a wide range of courses is offered at the basic, applied, and academic (university-bound) levels. The gifted (science enrichment) program is provided for about 240 students, 13% of the school population, and was introduced in the 1980s. Entrance to the program is based on (a) students' scores on an examination that contains mathematics, science, and written components; (b) teacher recommendations; (c) the most recent report card; and (d) a student profile in which students write an essay describing their interests and hobbies. The selection committee takes into account the fact that English is not a student's first language, where this is applicable.

The science enrichment program consists of enriched courses in the sciences, mathematics, English, and the social sciences from Grades 9 through 11. For their other courses, science enrichment students study with students in the regular stream. In the 12th grade, Advanced Placement courses are also

offered, primarily for the science enrichment students. Extensive opportunities for research projects in science and technology provide students with authentic learning experiences in their areas of specialty. The program is thriving thanks to the dedication of its core staff, which includes a part-time coordinator who is responsible for all administrative tasks associated with the program. There have been few other resources provided during the past few years of fiscal restraint, although independent funding has been obtained for specific pieces of equipment and field trips.

In many ways, Sprucedale's program is well integrated into the larger school setting. As with Maple Heights, it is not housed in a separate wing or section of the building, and efforts are made to develop bonds between the science enrichment students and the overall student body, again mostly through extracurricular activities. Although the core teachers in the program teach primarily in the science enrichment program, each of them also teaches at least one other course each year.

*Pineview Secondary School (international baccalaureate; IB).* Pineview Secondary School is a suburban school with about 1,200 students in a neighborhood that is both socioeconomically and ethnically diverse. As with Maple Heights and Sprucedale, an equal opportunity culture is evident at Pineview. In addition to the IB program, it has a large school-to-work transition program, a thriving cooperative education program, and strong academic courses. There are 250 students in pre-IB classes in Grades 9 and 10 and in the IB in Grades 11 and 12, accounting for just more than 20% of the school population (see Table 1). As with the other two schools in this study, the school attempts to integrate students across programs, in this case primarily through extracurricular activities. Although many IB teachers also teach in the regular program, the core teachers teach primarily in the IB program.

The IB program was introduced in the 1980s and is supported by a half-time coordinator/counselor. Students qualify to participate by achieving grades of more than 80% in the challenging pre-IB courses offered in the 9th and 10th grades. The IB features a rigorous academic program; a "Theory of Knowledge" component, which is an interdisciplinary requirement intended to stimulate critical reflection on the knowledge and experience gained inside and outside the classroom and which encourages students to appreciate other cultural perspectives; a public service requirement; and an extended essay. Preparation for the externally evaluated IB examinations drives the curriculum.

This model of education for high-ability learners promotes readiness for college and is perceived by many to "represent the highest levels of academic attainment possible for secondary students" (VanTassel-Baska, 2000, p. 348). It is frequently mentioned as one of several possible cost-effective options for gifted learners (Davis & Rimm, 2004; Lupkowski-Shoplik, Benbow, Assouline, & Brody, 2003).

## Design and Procedure

The schools in this study use three different approaches to high-ability programming (gifted, scientifically focused, and IB), enabling us to consider which features might be attributable to the high-ability school-within-a-school model, rather than resulting from one of these particular programming approaches. We chose settings where both the special gifted program had been long established and where the host school appeared to be functioning well, thereby minimizing confounds because of early implementation glitches as well as serious disparities across programs within a school. This design allows us to consider the strengths and tensions inherent in the gifted school-within-a-school model, at least as evident in these cases, and thereby to provide educators with some provisional recommendations about program design and maintenance.

Data collection comprised questionnaires, interviews, and observations. Anonymous questionnaires were given to students and teachers in the special and regular programs at each of the three participating schools. Four hundred and seventy-one students returned questionnaires, 227 of whom attend one of the three special gifted programs and 244 of whom attend one of the participating schools' regular programs. (For a further breakdown of numbers of students per school/per program, see Table 2.) The questionnaires were given to students during class time by teacher candidates (student teachers) whose associate (supervising) teachers gave permission to conduct the survey in their classes. Students were invited to submit blank forms if they preferred not to participate.

A questionnaire was put into each teacher's mailbox in each of the schools, and a box was provided near the mailboxes where teachers could deposit anonymously their completed questionnaires. Fifty-nine teachers across the three schools provided questionnaire responses. Because most of them currently teach or have taught in both programs, we present the teachers' findings without the gifted/regular distinction.

Where teachers demonstrated an interest in further conversation with the research team, the questionnaires

**Table 2**  
**Number of Participants by School,**  
**Program, and Position**

School	Students, Gifted	Students, Regular	Teachers	Total
Maple Heights	93	67	38	198
Sprucedale	68	80	9	157
Pineview	66	97	12	175
Total	227	244	59	530

were supplemented with interviews. Interview questions mirrored the survey questions, and responses were recorded and analyzed using the coding system developed for the questionnaire. The teachers supervising the teacher candidates in the regular and the special programs at the three schools were also interviewed, using the questionnaire as a protocol. Finally, the teacher candidates provided written observations about their experiences in the schools. These latter data sources were used to inform our data analysis and interpretation, providing a triangulation of perspectives for our understanding of the gifted school-within-a-school experience.

The questionnaires and interview protocols consisted mainly of open-ended questions without response prompts (see below). Questions concerned participants' perceptions of the special programs under investigation, including strengths and problems associated with each type of program. This format has the advantages and disadvantages of providing open-ended snapshots of students' impressions and feelings at the time they were answering the questionnaire. We did not draw conclusions or make recommendations except when there was a triangulation of data, including a high level of agreement across respondents and situations that were validated by researcher observations and/or teacher interviews.

Because we were interested in the awareness of and interest in the high-ability programs of the students not in those programs, we asked them to discuss that as well as the gifted program's strengths, weaknesses, and relationship to the rest of the school, just as we did with participants in the program. Following questions about their grade level, identification as gifted, and familiarity with the gifted program, the questions for the students at Maple Heights were as follows:

- Would you recommend the gifted program at Maple Heights to friends or family members?
- What do you see as the program's strengths?

How could the program be better? What changes would you like to see made?

How would you characterize the relationship between the gifted program and the wider community at Maple Heights?

These questionnaires were adapted for the other groups by changing the name of the school and application to teachers, as appropriate, resulting in a total of nine different protocols: At each school, there was one questionnaire form for the students participating in the high-ability program, one for the students not participating in the program, and one for the teachers. Considerably more teachers were recruited from Maple Heights ( $n = 38$ ) than from Sprucedale ( $n = 9$ ) and Pineview ( $n = 12$ ) (see Table 2). This reflects the fact that we have been building our relationship with Maple Heights for several years, whereas we had only begun working with teachers and teacher candidates at Sprucedale and Pineview. For a number of logistical reasons, we chose not to pursue our attempts to get more teacher responses at these schools and opted to use the data that we received on the first request. Based on the triangulated data from several sources, and in the interest of completing the study in the time allowed, we decided that the data we collected were sufficient for the heuristic purposes of this study.

### Data Analysis

Descriptive statistics, qualitative analyses, and inferential statistics were generated for each of the nine participant categories (students in gifted and regular programs and teachers at each of the three schools). As with all research using open-ended questions, summarization and coding of the data were somewhat challenging; it is easy to misinterpret or misclassify open-ended comments. The goal of the analysis was to discover common themes in participants' perceptions and to organize this information to develop some understandings about perceived strengths and weaknesses in the school-within-a-school experience.

In a series of meetings, we adapted an approach to coding recommended by Bogdan and Biklen (1998). We began by randomly selecting a sample of 10% of the students' questionnaires. A team of two teacher candidates, one graduate student, and two professors with expertise in gifted education each read this sample of 47 questionnaires and independently generated coding categories based on our sense of the categories that were emerging as relevant in the data. We discussed the various categorical systems we had devised

**Table 3**  
**Students' Perceptions of Their School's High-Ability Program**

Response	High-Ability Programs						Regular Programs					
	Maple Heights G/T		Sprucedale SE		Pineview IB		Maple Heights		Sprucedale		Pineview	
	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>
Would recommend*	90	84	84	57	77	51	54	36	62	50	57	50
Strengths of program*	80	74	97	66	97	64	57	38	58	46	69	60
Academic <sup>a</sup>	77		83		69		87		65		84	
Social <sup>ab</sup>	23		17		31		13		35		16	
Recommended changes*	88	82	73	50	92	61	39	26	52	42	48	42
Academic <sup>a</sup>	84		75		96		31		18		70	
Social <sup>ab</sup>	16		25		4		69		82		30	
Relationship positive	43	40	24	16	20	13	24	16	11	9	18	16
Relationship mixed	3	3	53	36	26	17	1	1	30	24	15	13
Relationship negative	53	49	22	15	41	27	30	20	23	18	32	28

a. Percentages based on number of responses to the question (not total *n*).

b. Includes school climate concerns, as well as personal/individual factors and other peer-related issues.

\**p* < .05.

and forged a mutually satisfactory consensus on the most meaningful categories for the data. We then reread the sample questionnaires with the consensus-determined categories in mind. Further categories were developed and previous categories were refined or discarded as new themes emerged in the data. We worked together with this sample of questionnaires until we had established 80% interrater agreement, resulting in an acceptable degree of confidence that the classification system effectively summarized participants' responses (Carmines & Zeller, 1991). At this point, the remaining students' questionnaires were coded and then summarized.

We kept the same categories in mind as we analyzed the teachers' responses. These were similar in tone and content to the responses of the students in gifted programs. They were, however, more complex, qualified, and nuanced, and we found that the categorization system used with the students' responses (to all but the first question about recommending the program to friends and family) yielded at best a forced fit and at worst a misrepresentation of the teachers' communications to us. Rather than developing a second categorization system for the teachers' response and then comparing rates of response across two different systems, we chose to report the teachers' responses descriptively only, without attempting to quantify them in the same way that we did with the students.

## Results

The findings are reported here in the aggregate, by interview/survey question, with all groups included, and distinctions made among groups as relevant or noteworthy. In the "Discussion" section, we consider more broadly the patterns of perceptions of school-within-a-school programs for students of high ability.

### Would You Recommend the High-Ability Program to Friends or Family Members?

A majority of the high-ability program students said that they would recommend their respective gifted program to family and friends, with responses varying from 77% (Pineview IB) to 90% (Maple Heights Gifted) (see Table 3). A chi-square analysis showed that these responses were not statistically different across schools,  $\chi^2(2, n = 251) = 0.42, p > .05$ ; the program participants did not vary across schools in their feeling that their high-ability program was good enough to recommend to friends and family.

The regular program participants' responses to this question were also generally positive, ranging from 54% (Maple Heights) to 62% (Sprucedale) answering yes to the program recommendation question. A chi-square analysis showed that, as with the high-ability respondents, these responses were not statistically different across schools,  $\chi^2(2, n = 173) = 0.68, p > .05$ . As



might be expected, however, the rate of recommendation was lower in the regular programs than in the gifted programs: The students not in the high-ability programs were less likely than their schoolmates in gifted programs to say that they would recommend the gifted program to friends and family members,  $t(4, n = 424) = 5.88, p = .004$ .

Teachers' response rates were similar to those of the gifted students, with 72% (Pineview) to 92% (Maple Heights) indicating that they would recommend the program in their school to friends or family.

### **What Do You See as the Program's Strengths?**

Program strengths were identified by most of the students in high-ability programs, ranging from 80% (Maple Heights) to 97% (Sprucedale and Pineview), and the number of students identifying at least one strength was not different across schools,  $\chi^2(2, n = 274) = 2.61, p > .05$ . The majority of strengths mentioned by students in the gifted programs were academic, including a challenging academic program, enrichment opportunities, a faster pace, more interesting coursework, strong teachers, and good preparation for university. Academic strengths also included (for Pineview respondents) the "world recognition" of the IB diploma. As one student wrote, "the projects and activities we're given are designed specifically for 'gifted' students who get more into school than most nongifted students, and so we can accomplish more because everyone is motivated. And the class discussions are more stimulating."

Social strengths were mentioned by 17% (Sprucedale) to 31% (Pineview) of students in high-ability programs. Included in this category were perceived advantages in areas of school climate and of social and emotional development. School climate strengths identified by the students included a better environment for learning, interactions with smarter students with the same goals and/or similar interests, smaller classes, more discipline, opportunities for group work, higher level of academic motivation, dynamic teachers with control of the classroom environment, and better competition. Social and emotional strengths included acquiring positive learning habits, developing time management skills, and establishing closer bonds between program students. One Maple Heights gifted program student wrote, "You are surrounded by students who mostly want to be there and want to learn." A Sprucedale Science Enrichment student observed, "I personally

think the strengths of the program are the people rather than the courses; it's just a lot of fun when you are with people who have similar interests."

Although many students not in high-ability programs identified important strengths (ranging from 57% at Maple Heights to 69% at Pineview), they were less likely to identify program strengths than were their counterparts in gifted programs,  $t(4, n = 458) = 4.38, p = .01$ . Academic strengths mentioned by nonprogram participants included a more challenging program, enrichment opportunities, faster paced learning, help getting into a university, and opportunities to have individual strengths recognized and developed. For example, one non-IB student at Pineview wrote, "The IB program expands students' horizons. They get in-depth educational experiences that help them get into better universities."

Advantages coded as social included acquisition of better work habits, time management skills, motivation, and study skills; opportunities to work with similar and/or more highly motivated peers; and the development of individual talents. Some students saw advantages for those in the gifted program spilling over into the regular program; for example, one student wrote, "It allows more average students to excel more when they are not being compared to more gifted students." Others responded with negative comments when asked about strengths of the program (e.g., "Nothing really, they usually seem to be stressed most of the time").

In each of the three schools, most of the teachers' comments on program strengths focused on academic factors, often interacting with social factors. A common observation concerned the nature of the students themselves and their need for a more challenging differentiated curriculum and attention and/or their responsiveness to the challenges. Other program strengths identified by teachers included higher level peer interactions and consequent teaching opportunities, extra resources and activities, and a better learning environment for meeting the needs of high-ability students.

When asked about strengths of the gifted program, one of the Maple Heights teachers wrote,

Incredible students both academically and socially; talented teachers (able to grow professionally with gifted); academic focus, able to cover interesting material; creative approaches to teaching possible; what teaching and learning should be, in an environment characterized by good feelings and lots of laughter.

One of the Sprucedale teachers said, “We have a group of hard-working students who are genuinely interested in science and math. This allows us to do interesting enrichment activities without the distractions of students who really don’t want to be there.” The teachers at Pineview reported that the IB program helps with university preparation and admission, and (unlike many of the Pineview students, as discussed below) most of the Pineview teachers indicated that the IB program provides a well-rounded education.

### **How Could the Program Be Better? What Changes Would You Like to See Made?**

The majority of students in the high-ability programs made suggestions for improvements. Numbers of students recommending one or more improvements ranged from 73% at Sprucedale to 92% at Pineview, which was not different across schools,  $\chi^2(2, n = 253) = 1.27, p > .05$ . Most of the participants’ suggestions focused on academic concerns, including lightening the workload; lowering teacher expectations; improving teaching by using more flexible and creative teaching methods and by being more supportive, encouraging, and understanding teachers; standardizing assessment; providing more programming flexibility and course selection; and offering better coaching for contests and better preparation for Advanced Placement courses.

Recommended social changes included providing students with more time for a personal, social, and extracurricular life; encouraging more social interaction with students in the high-ability program, both in their own grade and other grades; reducing the stress level; providing more emotional support; providing social skills teaching; and designing a less elitist or segregated approach to gifted programming. One student wrote, “Different students have different strengths and weaknesses, and we should make the program more well-rounded.”

Students not in gifted programs also made many suggestions (varying from 39% at Maple Heights to 52% at Sprucedale) although at a lower rate than the students in gifted programs,  $t(4, n = 392) = 5.47, p = .005$ . It should also be noted that of those not making suggestions for improvements, several respondents made pointed comments suggesting that no changes were necessary because the program students had too many advantages already, the program should be abolished, or they didn’t care. For example, one student

wrote, “They already get treated as the better students at our school, and have a lot more privileges.”

Nonprogram students’ suggestions for academic improvements ranged from making the program easier by reducing the high-ability program students’ workload and reducing teacher expectations to making it harder by making the exams harder and making the work more challenging or meaningful. There were also suggestions for providing better teachers, standardizing assessments, increasing course selection, providing greater flexibility in course offerings, and providing more recognition for the extra and harder work. Many suggestions for improvement identified problems with perceived selectivity and/or exclusivity. Several suggestions were made about increasing access to the programs, including providing more information about the program for nonprogram students, allowing more flexibility about time of entry into the program, expanding the program, increasing enrolment, and also (on the other end of the inclusivity spectrum) being more selective about who gets into the program. Suggestions for improvement that were grouped into the social factors category focused on program students’ needs for more social time, better social skills, stress reduction, and more diversified experiences for well-rounded development.

When teachers were asked about making the program better, their suggestions also ranged across a number of areas, from providing more professional development for teachers, through providing mentorships for the students, to creating focused leadership development opportunities within the program. Across schools, many of the problems that they identified pertained to issues of inclusivity/exclusivity. Several made suggestions for improving interactions and communications between program participants and the rest of the school, including encouraging gifted program students to become more involved in the extracurricular life of the school and to demonstrate more leadership. One teacher wrote, “I think gifted students should have a more significant profile in the wider community. More leadership development opportunities should be part of the Gifted Program, particularly in areas that connect to community. Leadership development needs to be intentional.”

Some of the suggestions were particular to individual schools. At Pineview, some teachers reported a need to offer more variety in course selection to the students, more flexibility in selecting high-level and standard-level courses, more integration through nonacademic activities, and more transparency about

the IB program. They also expressed a desire for a formal and well-communicated procedure for students to enter and exit the IB program. Some Maple Heights teachers' comments focused on providing a more targeted matching of exceptional individual learning needs. One teacher wrote, "Shouldn't students opt out of the program for courses which are not their strength?"

### **How Would You Characterize the Relationship Between the High-Ability Program and the Wider Community at Your School?**

The gifted program students identified the relationship between the high-ability programs and the school as positive at rates varying from 20% (Pineview) to 43% (Maple Heights). Number of responses that were characterized as negative varied from 22% (Sprucedale) to 53% (Maple Heights), which was not significantly different than the positive response rate,  $t(4, n = 160) = 0.559, p > .05$ . Neutral or mixed responses varied widely, from 3% (Maple Heights) to 53% (Sprucedale). Positive responses described integrated activities; normal interactions; friendly, polite, courteous, and helpful relationships; opportunities for participation in extracurricular events; and friendships with nonprogram students. Gifted program respondents' negative characterizations of the relationship between their program and the rest of the school focused on segregation, isolation, insularity, and/or elitism. Concern was also expressed about stereotyping of program students by other students or vice versa, with feelings of tension, strain, and unfriendliness across programs. One student wrote, "Other students call us 'gifties' or 'nerds' and resent us." The following is an example of a mixed comment from a Pineview IB student: "The relationship is overall good, but there is a barrier between IB and non-IB which is fundamental and hard to change."

The answers from the students not in a gifted program yielded patterns that were similar to the answers of their gifted program peers, with no significant difference between rates of positive and negative responses about the relationship between the gifted program and the school,  $t(4, n = 125) = 2.17, p > .05$ . Their positive relationship responses noted that the gifted students are "normal" or "good" people and well integrated into the school; that the relationship is friendly, polite, courteous, and/or helpful; that the gifted students provide good role models for learning; and that they contribute to the school's reputation.

As might be expected from the suggestions for improvement, many negative comments concerned exclusivity and elitism, and several contained strong language about this. Respondents described the special programs as sheltered, insular, segregated, isolated, and alienated; they described high-ability students as arrogant or stuck up. They described the relationship between the gifted program and the school as weak, tense, strained, or unfriendly, with limited interaction across programs. They identified problems with stereotyping in both directions: the high-ability students stereotyped by others in the school and/or stereotyping them as well as high-ability students getting preferential treatment from teachers and/or in their university applications. According to one student, "They stick with their own kind and are very isolated." Another said, "The gifted program students think they are better than everyone else." A third response: "I do not feel the special program wants to be connected to the rest of the school community."

Questions about the relationship between the gifted program and the wider school communities elicited the same range of response from the teachers as from the students. On the positive end of the spectrum were glowing comments such as "the students from gifted contribute enormously to the school" and "positive influence who inspire others . . . these students will put the school on the map in the future." Many of the teachers' positive responses focused on contributions of gifted students to the larger school climate: "The gifted students are the ones who get involved with many of the projects both in and out of school."

On the other end of the spectrum were comments such as "distant/strained" and "jealousy from mainstream . . . a few arrogant special program students do not help." Some of the teachers provided perceptive observations about possible reasons for misunderstandings, such as this comment from a Sprucedale teacher: "There is the perception that Science Enrichment students have greater access to the school's resources. Sometimes this is because they are aggressive and strive for the resources. They are not merely given them. But the perception is important." Another interesting suggestion from a teacher at Maple Heights is as follows:

I feel that many "gifted" students look down upon others at Maple Heights. This greatly concerns me. I feel that if the gifted program only included those that are truly gifted in each area that they study, this may eliminate some problems.

Overall, although the teachers perceived the relationship between the special program students and the wider community as relatively positive, there was a pervasive concern about segregation and elitism.

## Discussion

One of the striking findings of this study was the similarity across schools in students' and teachers' responses to the questions we asked. Even though the schools and high-ability schools-within-schools are distinctly different in many ways, the responses of the teachers and of the students in the special programs and in the regular stream were remarkably similar to those in the corresponding programs at the other two schools, in numbers of responses to different questions and in the content of the responses, including strengths and problems identified, as well as the nature of the relationship with the wider school community.

In each school, the gifted, science enrichment, or IB program was generally regarded as challenging by students enrolled in the program as well as by other students in the school. Even among those with concerns about the programs, there was a widespread recognition that some students benefited from more challenging programs geared toward their abilities. It is hardly surprising that such programs are considered demanding; indeed, there would be no point in offering them if they were not, and this is cited by many as a core strength of these programs. At the same time, however, although special program students in all three schools described themselves as generally satisfied with their experience of academic challenge, they also expressed concerns about expectations and workload.

The large number of students in special programs that identified peer group as a strength may be interpreted to support the opinion of many experts in the field that high-ability learners benefit from opportunities to interact on a daily basis with their intellectual peers, as expressed well in the following student's comment: "You are surrounded by students who mostly want to be there and want to learn." At the same time, we should remember that although common educational values are probably important to the gifted program students' sense of group cohesion, the low to moderate status of high academic achievers in prevailing teen culture may also have contributed to the "creation of a counterculture that extols alternative values to those of the more popular groups" (Milner, 2004, p. 77). In addition to providing educational benefits, special programs like these can provide a safe

place within "the informal stratification system of students" (Milner, 2004, p. 187).

The special program students' frequent identification of certain teachers as program strengths, when juxtaposed with the number identifying a need for better teachers, may simply reflect individual differences in preferences and different students' experiences of the same teachers. Alternatively, however, or perhaps additionally, it appears that gifted students perceive some teachers as being better suited than others to working with them. When the comments across schools and questions are considered together, they suggest that high-ability students appreciate teachers who are able to balance an appropriately high level of academic challenges with encouragement, perceived fairness, and support.

Student concerns about assessment focused on clarity of expectations, provision of appropriate support, and fairness of evaluation procedures. Perhaps not surprisingly, the internationally administered IB exam seemed to cause the greatest assessment anxiety.

## Relationship Between the School-Within-a-School Programs and the Wider School Community

There are many reasons to see each of these special programs as exemplary in its relationship with the wider school community. The programs take place alongside other classes, not in separate wings or on separate floors of the school buildings, and there is movement between regular and special courses by most of the teachers as well as by the students. Teachers, administrators, and researchers generally regard each of these schools as having a positive atmosphere, with little apparent conflict between students in the gifted programs and those in regular programs. Many staff members and administrators expressed spontaneous approval for and appreciation of the school leadership demonstrated by the gifted students at their schools. There is rarely the kind of open hostility and friction at these schools that was described in *The New York Times* articles about the Bronx Aerospace Academy in Evander Childs High School and some other New York City schools-within-schools (Gootman, 2004; Herszenhorn, 2005).

In spite of the many strengths identified, however, the perception among the majority of both regular program and special program students, and among some of the teachers, is that there are serious negative aspects of the relationships. The findings of this study suggest that there is an important shared concern

across the three school-within-a-school situations pertaining to equity and the appearance of equity. As one Sprucedale student expressed, the special program students “already get treated as the better students and have a lot more privileges.” (It should be noted that among these privileges at that particular school was an extended field trip that the Science Enrichment students had taken just the week prior to the survey.)

The perception that high-ability students are granted extra privileges, combined with many students’ and teachers’ desires for more integration and more flexible access to enriched classes, underline the fact that administrators of special programs need to anticipate and address concerns about fairness. Recognizing this, a teacher in the Science Enrichment program at Sprucedale wrote,

I think in these days of cost-cutting that many view programs like SE with suspicion. . . . People do not mind when programs are focused on sports or technology or the arts, but the title “elitist” is used [only in reference to] academics. Yet these kids are often the most poorly served in the education system.

This comment reminds us that some equity-focused arguments ignore gifted students’ real need for differentiated programming.

Some of the students at Pineview who were not in the IB program described IB students as “constantly talking about homework” and as having “no social life.” Differences in the level of importance students attach to academic pursuits exist whether academically oriented students are placed in special programs or not and in fact constitute an argument for creating special programs where students are free to be serious about their studies if they choose to be, without feeling censured by their peers. A starting point for meaningful dialogue about these differences is offered by a student at Pineview: “I think that there is a stigma surrounding the relationship between those two factions. A better understanding of the program needs to be brought to the school instead of having people make wrong assumptions about it.”

This is a profound insight. Understanding and successfully managing differences hinges “upon recognizing and modifying aspects of the school climate, teacher/school personnel interaction with students, and social structures” (Reinke & Herman, 2002, p. 549). The teachers and administrators in this study, although aware of tensions, had not identified them as serious enough to require “a planned and thoughtful response” (Milner, 2004, p. 187). According to Milner (2004),

“teachers and administrators tend to see peer culture as largely outside of their realm of responsibility—unless school rules or laws are violated” (p. 186). Myths are dispelled only when teachers and administrators make understanding across groups a high priority.

Special school-within-a-school programs offer the possibility of targeting the unique challenges of exceptionally capable students, while building links among diverse kinds of students. The remarkable variability of student and teacher perceptions across programs in this study provides hope that we can learn from the community-building efforts of each of the schools and work toward building learning communities that provide equality of opportunity without breeding resentment or misunderstanding.

There are many limitations of this study. To begin with, it includes only three schools, and they share many attributes, including being easily available to us. This reduces our ability to generalize from this study to other gifted school-within-a-school situations. Because our student responses are only from those who chose to submit questionnaires, they may or may not be representative of the students at each of these schools; students in the gifted programs and outside them may be happier or more troubled than these findings suggest. We obtained only a small sampling of responses from teachers at two of the three schools and did not get input from administrators, which would have been valuable. The study would also have been richer if we had obtained parents’ reflections. In spite of these limitations, we believe that the data we did collect are worth consideration. It raises some interesting questions and yields some potentially useful recommendations for those of us interested in meeting gifted students’ learning needs.

## Recommendations

The school-within-a-school enrichment programs at Maple Heights, Sprucedale, and Pineview were selected because their teachers and administrators are committed both to enrichment for high-ability learners and to good learning opportunities for other students, as well as to building relationships across programs in their schools. Each of the three schools included in this study has been successful in providing challenging academic programs for gifted learners. Each of the gifted programs has made efforts to be flexible in program access and to share resources with the school as a whole. Nonetheless, the perception has developed among many of the students and teachers that these programs are exclusive or elitist and at least somewhat

isolated from the rest of the school. Based on the findings of our investigation, we make the following recommendations for educators and administrators considering school-within-a-school gifted programs.

1. *Transparency and communication.* Open channels of communication are essential to helping others understand the nature of and reasons for special enrichment programs. Each school in this study made information available about their special programs, including admissions criteria and academic standards. Nonetheless, many of the students in the regular program had misconceptions about many aspects of the special programs in their schools. Thus, we would recommend concerted efforts to proactively provide all relevant information. As new students enter the school each year and the entire student population changes during the course of 4 years, awareness needs to be raised and maintained every year.
2. *Flexible access to gifted programs.* Exclusivity was a frequently mentioned concern across all of the groups in this study, with a strong sense of the gifted program as forming a segregated group in the school. More flexibility in access and more frequent entry points would appear to be the best way to alleviate this. It should be noted, however, that all three programs studied here do have some flexibility in admitting students. The gifted program at Maple Heights is open only to identified-gifted students but also permits other high-achieving students to take gifted-level classes when space is available. At Sprucedale, vacancies in the science enrichment program are filled by students in the regular program. The pre-IB program at Pineview is open to all students at the school, although entry to the formal IB program in Grade 11 is contingent on academic grades, and some students are counseled out prior to beginning the IB program. When enrichment programs offer reasonably flexible access (as is the case with each of these three programs), it is important that this information about flexibility be disseminated widely and that other students be encouraged to see that they have some choice about participation, which takes us back to our first recommendation, the need for transparency and communication.
3. *Equitable access to equipment, facilities, and field trips.* Some of the students who participated in this study expressed resentment of gifted program students' perceived access to more or better equipment, facilities, and field trips. Although many of the teachers indicated that these resources were available for use by all students, the special program students took advantage of them much more frequently. These issues were raised most frequently at Sprucedale, the school with the widest disparity

between the income levels of the regular and enrichment program students. The enrichment program staff indicated that the special science equipment and facilities, donated to the school because of the enrichment program, benefited all students in the school. Two teachers suggested that the higher socioeconomic status of students in the enrichment program meant that their parents were able to pay for more outings. This economic disparity between program students and the rest of the school is exacerbated by the fact that the neighborhood around the school is less advantaged relative to most in the city and that most of the science enrichment students are coming from other neighborhoods.

The enrichment program instructors at all three schools devote their own time and energy to organizing and chaperoning special outings and trips. Because teachers in the regular program have been less involved in creating similar opportunities at these schools, some perceptions of privilege are almost inevitable and not unfounded. Schools that have special high-ability programs need to work proactively to ensure that all students have access to the kinds of resources and field trips that are provided to the special program students. Also (back to Recommendation 1), teachers and principals need to communicate effectively with the school community the nature of access to equipment, facilities, and field trips and perhaps look for ways to get teachers and parents of students in the regular program as actively engaged as are those in the gifted program.

4. *Educators' awareness of misconceptions and stereotypes.* In all three schools, teachers' perceptions were more positive than those of their students concerning the interaction between enrichment and regular-stream students. Although the teachers' perceptions may in fact be more accurate, reflecting their greater maturity and breadth of knowledge of the school, it is important to attend to the widespread nature of students' perceptions. It is important that educators be aware of potential tensions between students in enrichment programs and their peers in regular programs. Informed by this awareness, stereotypes and misconceptions can be addressed and cross-group interaction enhanced.
5. *Recognition of diverse pathways to excellence and achievement.* At each of the schools included in this study, there are many special programs in addition to the gifted program that receive attention for their exceptional participants and achievements, both within and outside the school. We saw some evidence in our various sources of data that where diverse kinds of excellence and achievement were actively celebrated, it went a long way toward lessening resentment of any one program or group of

students, including the gifted program and its participants. Another recommendation based on our observations of these three schools, then, is that schools can increase the acceptance and understanding of gifted academic programs by providing all students in the school with many possible pathways to excellence, recognition, and notable achievement.

## Conclusion

We, like many in gifted education, recognize advantages to both integrated and congregated programming for high-ability learners. As a result, we are attracted to the concept of a school-within-a-school that provides both specialized gifted programming and also opportunities for interaction with the general school population in a manner that is mutually enriching. This study confirms that when specialized gifted programs are housed in larger schools, “program developers also need to pay attention to the interface of the gifted and general education” programs (Moon & Rosselli, 2000, p. 505). In particular, collaboration is vital to balance concerns about equity and excellence, reinforce common goals, and enable all students to benefit from the strengths of the entire school community (Tomlinson, Coleman, Allan, Udall, & Landrum, 1996).

It is almost tautological to observe that exceptionally able learners have special educational needs that cannot be met without differentiating the pace, depth, and complexity of the educational programming that is normally offered at the student’s age and grade level. At the same time, however, students who have gifted learning needs must coexist with others, and it is best for everyone if the coexistence is experienced as mutually beneficial rather than as antagonistic or elitist. Each of the three schools in this study sought to address these two goals (differentiated gifted programming and harmonious coexistence) simultaneously by providing enriched programs while sharing classrooms, teachers, extracurricular activities, and resources across the school. Despite these efforts, and in a context of many successes, the perceptions of students, parents, and teachers in all of these schools were mixed.

Although we learned something about the experiences of students and teachers in school-within-a-school contexts, our investigation raised more questions than it answered. For example, given that the programs under investigation are exemplary in many important ways, is there perhaps an inevitability to the

resentment of special programs, as suggested by several current analyses (Borland, 2003b; Callahan, 2003; Ford, 2003)? Is our goal of providing special education as appropriate while fostering cross-group community an egalitarian adult’s utopian goal, and not realistic, not one shared by adolescents who create their own subgroups and status hierarchies regardless of whether there are officially designated groups?

The findings of this study highlight the need for educators who are concerned with exceptionally capable learners to continue to consider effective approaches that will “allow idiosyncratic learners to thrive” (in the words of one of our teacher respondents), while simultaneously avoiding misconceptions and prejudices. Conceptually, we continue to support special programs within larger schools as they appear to be a good way to provide highly capable learners with the intellectual challenges they need as well as opportunities to interact productively with their intellectual peers. We come away from this study with a clearer sense of the challenges associated with this model as well as some ideas for addressing them.

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