

## Allowing Idiosyncratic Learners to Thrive: Policy Implications of a Study of School-within-a-School Gifted Programs

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### Abstract

School-within-a-school programs are an alternative school choice that can provide differentiated learning opportunities for academically gifted students, but they are often politically contentious. In a recent study, we interviewed 530 students and teachers in gifted and regular streams in three publicly-funded secondary schools with different approaches to high-ability school-within-a-school programs: gifted, International Baccalaureate, and science-focused. Although teachers and students across conditions expressed strong satisfaction with the academic challenges provided by the special programs, they also expressed serious concerns about the relationship between these programs and the larger schools within which they are housed. Taking into consideration concerns about gifted education taking resources from more urgent educational and societal goals, we discuss policy implications of our findings, considering ways to “allow idiosyncratic learners to thrive” (in the words of a teacher interviewed in this study), while minimizing misconceptions, prejudices, and perceptions of elitism.

### Allowing Idiosyncratic Learners to Thrive: Policy Implications of a Study of School-Within-a-School Gifted Programs

The movement for school choice has become a powerful force in North American education. For some time now, advocates for publicly-funded alternative education programs have argued that too many of our public schools are failing to meet the educational needs of students (Arons, 1997; Lieberman, 1993; Milner, 2004), and suggested that competition among schools and schooling choices can lead to more and better choices (Coulson, 1999; Doyle & Feldman, 2006; Kirkpatrick, 1990). Parents of gifted children are among the most vocal advocates for school choice. A *Google* search of “gifted education school choice” yields over six and a half million listings, and gifted education is one of the “topics of vital importance” listed on the homepage of the *Journal of School Choice* website.

Some parents of gifted learners, observing that mainstream public school classrooms do not always provide what's needed for exceptionally advanced learners, seek alternatives outside the public education system. Unfortunately, however, while private schools may serve many students well, frequently they do not address systematically or well the learning needs of students who need extra educational services (Bell, Jones, & Johnson, 2002). Indeed, even advocates for school choice acknowledge that market forces may leave exceptional learners to public school districts, which can then end up serving as "last resort providers" for students for whom "no market supply response is yet evident" (Adams & Hill, 2006, p. 232). While competitive independent schools can work very well for bright highly-motivated children, such schools often have a one-size-fits-all approach to learning that fails to address exceptional advancement, particularly when advancement is combined with individualistic or idiosyncratic temperament or personality characteristics. For one example, most private schools do not address systematically or well the learning needs of the student who is extremely gifted mathematically. Our clinical experience suggests that the more highly gifted the child, and/or the more domain-specific the giftedness, the less likely it is that a private school will be able to provide a good educational fit. Publicly-funded schools are legislatively mandated to accommodate many different kinds of learners, and are therefore often more ready, willing, and able to address diversity in students' learning ability (Andrews & Lupart, 2000; Eckes & Plucker, 2005; Matthews & Foster, 2005).

This is not to say that it is easy to find a good fit for exceptionally advanced learners in North America's public schools. One of the frustrations experienced by parents of high-ability learners looking for alternatives within the public system results from the apparent values conflict between meeting the special learning needs of gifted students, on the one hand, and supporting equity and social justice, on the other. Many well-meaning educators, citizens, and decision-makers think that gifted education is just a way of providing a better education for a select few who are already advantaged, and so by virtue of its very purpose, fosters elitism (Borland, 2003a; Ford, 2003). This perception can undermine the creation and maintenance of programming for children whose educational development is exceptionally advanced.

#### The School-within-a-School Model

The small schools movement has its roots in educational reform, and incorporates a perspective that schools should work toward resolving issues of social justice and racial inequity: "When committed educators and community activists in New York City, Philadelphia, Chicago, Oakland, Boston, and Cincinnati launched the movement, they were desperately seeking alternatives to the failures of big city high schools. They fashioned a vibrant, gutsy social movement for creating democratic, warm, and intellectually provocative schools, particularly for poor and working-class youth of color." (Fine, 2005)

The school-within-a-school approach is one way of creating a small school, and was developed as a vehicle for school reform by general educators wanting to improve existing schools (Deweese, 1999). There are many administrative and structural variations on this theme, ranging from special programs with close linkages to the larger school, to administratively separate small schools housed within larger schools (Raywid, 1995). Advocates for school-within-a-school programs argue that academic achievement and student well-being are higher in small schools, and that this is particularly important for at-risk students and those from disadvantaged backgrounds (Howley & Bickel, 2000; Lee & Smith, 1995).

Large urban schools sometimes create specialized academies within their schools in order to attract strong students and foster a culture more conducive to learning (Sapon-Shevin, 1994; Borland, 2003a). With substantial financial backing from the Gates Foundation, this approach has gained support in several large American cities in the past few years, including from New York Mayor Michael Bloomberg who is publicly committed to breaking up huge inner city high schools and creating smaller learning communities. *The New York Times* ran a series of articles on New York's schools-within-schools, in which education reporters investigated the experience of students and teachers in the smaller new schools as well as in their large host schools. Many concerns were expressed about safety and perceptions of equity; students from the larger school were described as occasionally disrupting classes in the smaller school, and sometimes going so far as to incite physical incidents. Teachers and students in the large schools and in the small new schools expressed concerns about perceived disparities in privilege, public attention, and resources (Gootman, 2004; Herszenhorn, 2005).

New York's experience is consistent with the research on schools-within-schools. As one might expect, researchers have found that it is challenging to balance the needs of the smaller (often more rigorous) school with the larger (usually more troubled) school in which it is housed. Problems can include fractured relationships, rivalries, inequitable tracking, and diminished school coherence (Deweese, 1999). One of the problems experienced by a new small school is creating a coherent new identity and set of policies within the framework of an already-established larger identity (Raywid, 1985).

Like other options considered by advocates for school choice, schools-within-schools are attractive to people seeking specialized education that is not otherwise available in the public system (McAndrews & Anderson, 2002). The concept can be very appealing to supporters of public education who are concerned that activities in regular classrooms are not differentiated appropriately to address the needs of exceptionally advanced learners (Moon & Rosselli, 2000). Their concern is supported by evidence of academic growth and improved learning motivation for exceptionally advanced students who are grouped together for most of their academic coursework (Delcourt, Lloyd, Cornell, & Goldberg, 1994; Kulik, 2003; Rogers, 1991, 2002). At least theoretically, the school-within-a-school model offers a way to address the learning needs of high-ability students while at the same time providing opportunities for access to the resources and diversity of a larger school.

#### Excellence vs. Equity: Recurring Tensions in Gifted Education

Gifted programs within larger schools offer the possibility of balancing excellence and social/educational equity, long a troubling concern in gifted education. In the middle of the last century, 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). The argument continues to be raised today in the gifted education literature (Borland, 2003a, 2003b; Ford, 2003), as well as in popular media. In a recent article in *The New York Times*, for example, an education reporter argued that the Bloomberg administration is making a mistake by focusing so much energy on programs for gifted learners when the real focus ought to be on improving the level of education in regular programs (Herszenhorn, 2006).

Others reframe the debate slightly. Instead of perceiving gifted education policies as representing a conflict between equity and excellence, they argue for the need to distinguish between equality of *outcome* and equality of *opportunity*. Outcome egalitarians believe that public education ought to eradicate the learning gap, to equalize student outcomes, which usually means focusing on raising standards for the poorest performers, making the (often implicit, but sometimes explicit) assumption that high ability students require no special educational attention. Proponents of equal opportunity, on the other hand, focus on providing each student with appropriate opportunities to learn (Moon & Rosselli, 2000; VanTassel-Baska & Stambaugh, 2006), with an education that facilitates continuous progress (Reis, Gubbins, Briggs, Schreiber, Richards, Jacobs, Eckert, Renzulli, & Alexander, 2003). The equal opportunity position conceptualizes giftedness as 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.

For those who are concerned about the achievement gap across race and socioeconomic status, these two conceptions (equality of outcome and equality of opportunity) are easily conflated. Richard Rothstein, an economic and educational policy analyst has discussed this problem in a number of forums (Rothstein, 2004, 2006) including in a recent talk to the School of Education at Hunter College, City University of New York, where he argued that George W. Bush's promise to close the achievement gap is unrealistic as well as being unfair to educators. There are too many other factors affecting children's opportunities to learn, factors that start long before children get to school, and that continue through the elementary and later years. If we really want to close the education gap between Blacks and Hispanics on the one hand, and Whites on the other, he argued, we have to make sure that early and ongoing opportunities to thrive and to learn are equalized. We will not be able to close the achievement gap unless we do something about the poverty, stressors, access to health and dental care, available resources, early learning experiences, family structure, and cultural attitudes that underlie the achievement gap.

Frank Worrell makes Rothstein's case as it affects gifted education. Race differences in test scores are robust across various measures of intelligence and achievement, and reflect real differences in opportunities to learn; we cannot expect the same number of African-American, Hispanic, and white children to be identified as gifted when their opportunities to thrive and learn are so different (Worrell, in press). This does not mean that advocates of gifted education can be blasé about the racial differences, but rather that the elitism charges against gifted education are focusing on a symptom and ignoring the underlying causes.

Many advocates of gifted education acknowledge that elitism persists as an issue. McLeod and Cropley (1989), for example, while claiming that gifted programs are not inherently elitist, suggest that by tending to favor students of high social or economic status, such programs often induce resentment 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).

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 any kind of

segregated gifted programming can create or exacerbate problems of equity and elitism (Borland, 2003b; Ford, 2003).

### A Study of Three High-Ability Schools-Within-Schools

Acknowledging the validity of multiple points of view (widespread perceptions of problems with public education, the need to differentiate programming for exceptionally advanced learners, and concerns with equity), we designed a study of three school-within-a-school programs (Matthews & Kitchen, in press). We hoped to inform ongoing discussions and perhaps yield “fresh understanding on the design, implementation, and effects of various types of school choice initiatives” (Wong & Walberg, 2006, p. 1). In order to better understand students’ and teachers’ perceptions of special gifted programs at the high school level, we investigated whether those in a special gifted program feel isolated from the larger school community, and whether or not there is the 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 teachers and students. Student voices were of particular interest as they are too often silent and silenced when they should be regarded as “expert witnesses” on their own educational experiences (Cook-Sather, 2002, p.3). We wanted to consider ways in which the public education system might be able to provide rich learning opportunities for exceptional learners within large, diverse high schools.

Following a review of our findings (reported in greater detail in Matthews & Kitchen, in press), we discuss the policy implications of these findings for gifted education and school choice.

### The Cases: The Schools

Our research questions concerned the nature of students’ and teachers’ experiences of high schools with gifted programs, from the standpoint of those participating in the programs, as well as those excluded from them. We wanted to get a sense of how students and teachers experience school-within-a-school gifted programs.

We selected a multicase case study approach as the best design to address these questions (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007; Jordan & Porath, 2005; Ragin & Becker, 1992). Despite the problems with generalizability inherent in this research design, it provides the flexibility and responsiveness to participants that we needed if we were to achieve our objective of understanding students’ and teachers’ school experience, as well as providing us with an opportunity to make some comparisons across the three cases.

We examined three secondary schools as cases, schools which we are calling Maple Heights, Sprucedale, and Pineview. Each one houses a high-ability school-within-a-school program which provides special programs for high-ability learners and is highly regarded within its large urban school district, as well as more broadly across Canada and, in at least one case, internationally. 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 other studies of specialized gifted programs (e.g., Donovan & Cross, 2002; Sapon-Shevin, 2003).

### Maple Heights Secondary School (Gifted)

Maple Heights Secondary School is a socio-economically diverse urban school of about 2000 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, and gifted, with the 450 students in the gifted program comprising about 23% of the school population. Students are formally identified as gifted if they attain above the 98<sup>th</sup> percentile (130+) on the most current edition of the Wechsler Intelligence Scale for Children, administered free by the Board of Education to those students whose parents or teachers recommend them. The gifted program features enriched courses in all academic subject areas for the first three years of high school (from Grade 9 through Grade 11). In Grade 12, identified-gifted students take courses in the general education program, mostly at the academic (top) and Advanced Placement levels. (See Table 1 for a synopsis of the schools' basic characteristics.)

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. Among the program highlights are the interdisciplinary course modules that draw on the school's technical, business, and academic facilities. This model of gifted education, with a flexible program, diverse kinds of challenging learning opportunities both within and outside conventional academic subject areas, interdisciplinary focus, and a half-time coordinator to support staff and students, has proven very successful in many important ways (Matthews & Smyth, 2000). Gifted courses are offered in the same classrooms and sections of the building as are used for other courses (rather than in a separate area of the building), and efforts are made to develop bonds between the gifted students and the overall student body, primarily in extracurricular activities. Teachers are restricted to no more than half their timetable teaching gifted courses, which also helps promote a high level of inter-program integration among teachers.

#### Sprucedale Secondary School (Science Enrichment)

Similar to Maple Heights, Sprucedale Secondary is an urban school with about 1900 students. In addition to the science enrichment program, it houses special education, cooperative education, and English as a Second Language programs, which are important because of a large population of recent immigrants, mainly from the Near East and South Asia. 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, or about 13% of the school population. Entrance to the program is based on (a) students' scores on a written examination; (b) teacher recommendations; (c) the most recent report card; and (d) a personal essay in which students describe their interests and hobbies. Of the three schools in the study, Sprucedale has the widest obvious disparity between the family income levels of the regular and enrichment program students. The community in which the school is situated is less advantaged relative to most in the city, and most of the science enrichment students are bused in from other neighborhoods.

The science enrichment program consists of enriched courses in the sciences, social sciences, mathematics, and English, from Grade 9 through 11. Extensive opportunities for research projects in science and technology provide students with authentic learning experiences in their areas of interest. In the twelfth grade, Advanced Placement courses are offered, and are taken primarily by the science enrichment students. At Sprucedale, like Maple Heights, the program is physically well integrated into the larger school setting rather than housed in a separate section of the building, and science enrichment students take all non-program courses with students in the regular stream. Although the core teachers in the program teach primarily in the science enrichment program, each teaches at least one other course each

year. Additional efforts to develop bonds between the science enrichment students and the overall student body are made through extracurricular activities. Critical to the program's effective operation is the dedication of its core staff, which includes a part-time coordinator responsible for program administration.

### Pineview Secondary School (International Baccalaureate)

Pineview Secondary School is a more suburban school than Maple Heights and Sprucedale, with about 1200 students in a neighborhood that is both socio-economically and ethnically diverse. As with the other two schools in this study, an equal opportunity culture is evident in the diverse kinds of educational opportunities provided at Pineview. In addition to the International Baccalaureate (IB) program, it has a large school-to-work transition program, a thriving co-operative education program, and strong academic courses. There are 250 students in pre-IB classes in Grades 9 and 10 and in the International Baccalaureate in Grades 11 and 12, accounting for just over 20% of the school population. Although many IB teachers also teach in the regular program, the core teachers teach primarily in the IB program. As with the other two schools in this study, the school attempts to integrate students across programs through extracurricular activities.

The IB program at Pineview is supported by a half-time coordinator/counselor. Students qualify to participate by achieving grades of over 80% in the challenging pre-IB courses offered in the 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> grades. This rigorous and broad academic program culminates in a final assignment that is assessed by external international IB examiners. 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).

### Research Design and Procedures

These three long-established and well-regarded programs were selected so that we could consider the strengths and tensions inherent in the gifted school-within-a-school model in somewhat optimal settings, allowing a critical analysis of what factors might foster success, and what might tend to be endemic to the model, even in a relatively successful implementation. Selecting schools with three very different approaches to high-ability programming (gifted, scientifically focused, and IB) permitted 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 approaches to programming.

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. (See Table 1 for a breakdown of the 530 participants by school, role, and program category.) The questionnaires and interview protocols consisted mainly of open-ended questions without response prompts. Students and teachers were asked if they would recommend the high-ability program at their school to friends or family members, what they see as the program’s strengths, how the program could be better, what changes they would like to see made, and how they would characterize the relationship between the high-ability program and the wider community at their school. This format has the advantages (and disadvantages) of providing open-ended snapshots of impressions and feelings at the time they were answering the questionnaire.

In order to discover common themes in participants’ perceptions, and to organize this information in order to develop some understandings about perceived strengths and weaknesses in the school-within-a-school experience, we adapted an approach to coding recommended by Bogdan & Biklen, 1998. The co-authors of the study and this article worked with three graduate students, and began by generating coding categories based on independent readings of a random



sample of students' questionnaires. Over several meetings and discussions, we forged a mutually satisfactory consensus of meaningful categories and established an 80% inter-rater reliability across the five raters. We then applied these categories to the remaining student questionnaires, further fine-tuning categories as we got deeper into the data. We then kept the same categories in mind as we analyzed the teachers' responses. Descriptive statistics, qualitative analyses, and inferential statistics were then generated for each of the nine participant categories (students in gifted and regular programs, and teachers at each of the three schools).

### Results

Although there were significant differences among the groups (teachers, special-program students, and regular-program students), there were surprisingly strong similarities across the three cases, and so we have reported our results collapsed across the schools, noting only those situations where there are noteworthy exceptions to this similarity.

When asked if they would recommend the high-ability program to friends or family members, a large majority of the high-ability program students across the three schools answered affirmatively. The regular program participants' responses to this question were also generally positive, although considerably less than their peers in the high-ability programs. Teachers' response rates were strikingly close to those of the gifted students, with most indicating that they would recommend the program in their school to friends or family. (For a more detailed breakdown of these responses, see Matthews & Kitchen, in press.)

Program strengths were identified by most of the students in high-ability programs, with the majority of strengths coded as academic in nature, including a challenging academic program, enrichment opportunities, a faster pace, more interesting coursework, strong teachers, and good preparation for university. Social strengths mentioned by high-ability students included perceived advantages in school culture such as 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 among program students. For example, 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 in regular programs identified important strengths of the high-ability program in their school, they were (perhaps not surprisingly) less likely to identify program strengths than were their counterparts in gifted programs. Non-program participants identified similar academic and social strengths to those mentioned by their peers in gifted programs (e.g., a more challenging program, enrichment opportunities, and faster-paced learning; acquisition of better work habits, time management skills, motivation, and study skills, and opportunities to work with similar and/or more highly motivated peers). At the same time, however, they were more likely to name instrumental advantages such as help getting into university, and opportunities to have individual strengths recognized and developed.

A theme running through many of the teachers' responses across the three schools was the enhanced opportunity provided by the program to meet high-ability learners' need for a more challenging curriculum. Other program strengths identified by teachers included higher-level peer interactions, extra resources and activities, and a better learning environment for meeting

the needs of high-ability students. Another frequent observation concerned the nature of the students themselves, and their need for differentiated curriculum and attention. For example, one teacher wrote, “Gifted students thrive in the enrichment provided in the gifted program. In regular classes they become bored, or the pace is too slow for them, and they do not have others who respond to ideas.” Another wrote that the gifted program, “allows for idiosyncratic learners to thrive.”

When asked how the program could be better and what changes they would like to see made, the majority of students in the high-ability programs made suggestions about 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.

It was on the question about recommended improvements that we began to see real concerns emerging on the part of students not in gifted programs, who frequently mentioned selectivity and/or exclusivity as concerns. For example, one student wrote about his high-ability program peers, “They already get treated as the better students at our school, and have a lot more privileges.” Suggestions included improving access to the high-ability programs, providing more information, allowing more flexible entry stages, expanding the program, and increasing enrollment. The non-program respondents also suggested that students in the high-ability programs needed more social time, better social skills, stress reduction, and more diversified experiences for their well-rounded development. Several respondents made pointed comments suggesting that gifted program students had too many advantages or that the program should be abolished.

Issues of inclusivity/exclusivity were also highlighted by teachers across the three schools. In spite of the fact that each school encourages students to mix across programs in extracurricular activities, several of the teachers 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.

The question about the relationship between the high-ability program and the wider community at the school was the one that elicited the strongest concerns. Gifted program students across the three schools were about as likely to identify the relationship as negative as they were to characterize it as positive, with many of them expressing a neutral or mixed position. Positive responses described integrated activities; normal interactions; friendly, polite, courteous, and helpful relationships; opportunities for participation in extracurricular events; and friendships with non-program students. Negative characterizations focused on segregation, isolation, insularity, and/or elitism. Concern was expressed about stereotyping of program students by other students and vice versa, with feelings of tension, strain, and unfriendliness mentioned by respondents across the three programs. 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, although (where negative) with more strongly negative observations. Their positive 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 of their negative comments concerned exclusivity and elitism. 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, as well as high-ability students getting preferential treatment from teachers and/or in their university applications. According to one student, “The gifted program students think they are better than everyone else.”

Questions about the relationship between the gifted program and the wider school communities elicited the same range of responses from the teachers as from the students. On the positive end of the spectrum were glowing comments that focused on contributions of gifted students to the larger school climate. On the other end of the spectrum were comments like “Distant/strained” and “Jealousy from mainstream...a few arrogant special program students do not help.” 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.

#### A Comparison with Students’ Perceptions of Other Challenging Programs

In “Student Voice and School Choice in the Boston Pilot High Schools”, Mary Doyle and Jay Feldman (2006) reported on student perceptions of Boston pilot schools. They report that the pilot schools “were opened in 1995 to promote increased choice and to create innovative school models within the district” (p. 370). These 19 pilot schools exist alongside 115 high schools, three examinations schools, two vocational schools, and an array of charter, private, and parochial schools. They operate autonomously in a number of ways: hiring and firing; per pupil budgets; curriculum and assessment decisions; governance structures; and determining the length of the school day and year. We discuss here the Doyle and Feldman (2006) study because of their research design that focused (as ours did) on the importance of listening to student voices concerning their experience with more challenging academic programming: “Through these students’ voices, educators and policy makers can hear how they could fill in this missing information and become more effective in their work...to transform schools into positive environments in which children learn and thrive in academic success” (p. 394).

We share the position that students’ observations can inform policy-making in ways that transform schools. Students and educators involved with the gifted and regular programs in each of the three schools we studied expressed strikingly similar perceptions of the strengths of their school-within-a-school programs, directions for improvement, and the nature of the relationship with the wider school community. These similarities across three distinctly different programs and schools can inform our understandings of the benefits and limitations of the school-within-a-school model, and help us get better at creating positive environments for learning and academic success.

In considering the policy implications of our study of school-within-a-school study, we will begin by juxtaposing our findings with Doyle and Feldman’s findings and conclusions,

using their organizing categories of academics, support, and school culture.

#### Academics

One of the driving forces behind the school choice movement is a desire for higher levels of academic challenge and achievement. In the Boston Pilot Schools study, 78% of applicants identified academics as their main reason for applying, with “challenging curriculum” being the most popular subcategory at 33% (Doyle & Feldman, 2006). Similarly, in our study, the gifted, science enrichment, and International Baccalaureate program were 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, while 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. This is an issue that was not reported on by Doyle and Feldman, but we would be surprised if it was not a concern for students in other academically rigorous schools.

Competitive entry processes and “self-selection and sorting, based on social class and family practices” (Fuller, 1996, p. 37) make it hard to measure the value-added of intentionally more demanding programs such as the Boston Pilot Schools and the high-ability schools-within-schools that we studied. At the same time, it is worth noting that the findings both of our study and of the work of Doyle and Feldman (2006) affirm the foundational principle of school choice advocates that challenging academic programs foster high expectations and academic success.

#### Support

Doyle and Feldman (2006) identify support as the second largest category of response among applicants to the schools studied (mentioned by 50% of participants). Three subcategories of support were coded on the basis of their focus group interviews: supportive environment, a small school, and good teachers. Although we did not organize our findings in exactly this way, the students in our study also identified a supportive environment as important. In particular, they noted the importance of having a peer group with similar interests, and identified the relatively small size and specialized nature of the program as advantages. They frequently identified certain teachers as program strengths, while also identifying some teachers as less supportive than they might be. This may simply reflect individual differences in preferences, and/or different students’ different personal 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 challenge with encouragement, perceived fairness, and support.

Doyle and Feldman make reference to the curriculum delivered by teachers, but do not address the teachers’ role in creating a challenging and rewarding academic environment. The value that the pilot school students attach to teacher support, however, is consistent with comments made by students in our study across programs and programming type that the teachers in the school-within-a-school programs maintained closer-than-usual relationships with their students.

#### School Culture

School culture was a particular area of interest in our study, both within the special program and in the wider school culture. Discussing the culture of pilot schools, the focus groups in Doyle and Feldman's study (2006) emphasized the benefits of attending a small school which shares common values and fosters a sense of community. We found similar responses to our questions about the school-within-a-school experience. The large number of students in special programs that identified their program-based peer group as a strength validates 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 (Clark, 1997; Kulik, 2003; Rogers, 1991, 2002). This was expressed well in a gifted program 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 while 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 sense of community within the special programs, leading to a what Milner (2004) describes as the "creation of a counterculture that extols alternative values to those of the more popular groups" (p. 77). In addition to any educational benefits they might provide, special programs like these can provide a safe place within "the informal stratification system of students" (Milner, 2004, p. 187).

There are many reasons to see each of the special programs we studied 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 that has been described in some New York City schools-within-schools (Gootman, 2004; Herszenhorn, 2005).

While important culture strengths were identified, many teachers and the majority of both regular program and special program students noted concerns or problems with the relationships. 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 Science Enrichment 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' need for differentiated programming.

#### Recommendations: Policy Implications

We do not address here the benefits or costs of all of the possible school choices such as private schools, charter schools, voucher programs, tuition tax credits, or other possible options (Wong & Walberg, 2006), but rather focus more narrowly on better understanding one public high school option: high-ability school-within-a-school programs, as illuminated by the voices of teachers and students at schools that have such programs. Having listened to the voices of the students and teachers in the three schools in our study, and thought about them in the context of the literature on schools-within-schools, gifted education, and school choice, we conclude that there are many advantages of such programming options. We make the following recommendations for educators and administrators considering developing or wanting to

improve school-within-a-school gifted programs.

1. Challenging academic programs should be provided to those who demonstrate the required ability. Such programs are perceived as beneficial for those students who are ready, willing, and able to handle a greater degree of challenge than usually provided. Such special programs are experienced as fostering higher expectations and greater academic success.
2. Teachers require training and support to work effectively with high-ability learners. Gifted students appreciate teachers who are able to balance an appropriately high level of academic challenge with encouragement, perceived fairness, and support.
3. Transparency and communication can alleviate or prevent many of the problems associated with school-within-a-school gifted programs. Many of the problems expressed by students who were not members of the special programs betrayed an ignorance of policies and practices, and/or a sense of being left out of an informational loop. This could be ameliorated considerably by open channels of communication. We therefore recommend ongoing systematic efforts to proactively provide all relevant information that might help non-participants to understand the nature of and reasons for special enrichment programs. Because in addition to normal teacher turnover, new students enter the school each year, and the entire student population changes over the course of four years, awareness needs to be raised and maintained every year.
4. Flexible access to programs should be provided. Exclusivity was a frequently-mentioned concern across all of the groups in all of the schools. Greater flexibility in access and more frequent entry points appear to be effective ways of alleviating this. It should be noted, however, that all three programs studied here do have some flexibility in admitting students. Even the least flexible of these programs in its entry criteria, the gifted program at Maple Heights, permits other high-achieving students to take gifted-level classes when space is available. When enrichment programs offer reasonably flexible access (as is the case with each of these three programs), it is important that the information about the nature and extent of flexibility be disseminated widely, and that other students be encouraged to see that they have some choice about participation. This takes us back to our recommendation concerning the need for transparency and communication.
5. Equitable access should be provided to equipment, facilities, and field trips. Some of the regular program students expressed resentment of gifted program students' access to more or better equipment, facilities, and field trips. Although many of the teachers reported that these resources and opportunities are available for use by all students, they also indicated that special program students took advantage of them much more frequently. These issues were raised most frequently at Sprucedale, the school with the widest obvious disparity between family income levels of the regular and enrichment program students. We therefore recommend that schools with special high-ability programs 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. It is perhaps equally important (back to recommendation #3), that teachers and principals communicate effectively with the overall school community about the nature and details of access to equipment, facilities, and field trips. Optimally, educators in such schools will work to get teachers and parents of students in the regular program as actively engaged in such activities and opportunities as are those in the gifted program, or at least make sure that everyone feels welcome and entitled to do so.
6. Educators should be aware of and address possible 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 and their possible misconceptions and stereotypes. We recommend that educators be aware of potential tensions between students in enrichment programs and their peers in regular programs, and address these proactively and responsively as quickly as possible. Myths are dispelled only when teachers and administrators make understanding across groups a high priority.

7. Schools should actively recognize 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 public attention for their exceptional participants and achievements, both within and outside the school. We saw some evidence in our various sources of data, including our participants' comments, that where diverse kinds of excellence and achievement are actively celebrated, it goes a long way toward lessening resentment of a special program or group of students. Our final recommendation is that educators provide and celebrate as many pathways as possible to excellence, recognition, and achievement.

8. Teachers should teach across programs where possible. In each of the cases that we studied, at least some of the teachers taught in both the regular and the high-ability programs. This appeared to act as a bridge from the high-ability program to the rest of the school, and could be used to increase bidirectional connections and reduce misperceptions and resentments.

9. Classrooms and hallways should be shared and not segregated. We speculate that one of the reasons for the relative inter-program harmony in the three cases we studied is the fact that the gifted program classrooms were not segregated physically, but rather were sprinkled throughout the school. This design feature can work to encourage familiarity and connection.

10. Extracurricular programs can provide important opportunities for connections. In each of the schools that we studied, there were extracurricular interactions of students across programs. Many participants recommended strengthening these opportunities.

#### Conclusion

School choice is a hot topic today in education and the media. There is much that we don't know about what works and what might work better. School choice is "much debated and sorely in need of both solid research and well-informed federal, state and local policies" (Wong & Walberg, 2006). The impact of school choice on the idiosyncratic learning needs of exceptionally advanced students is even less well understood and attended to through legislation. Our research into school-within-a-school programs for high ability learners contributes to the discussion by detailing the perceptions of students and teachers in three well-regarded programs within large publicly funded high schools. Our research highlights the importance of rigorous academics, support for students, and positive program and school cultures. This is consistent with research on small schools and pilot schools. It also suggests that high ability learners have needs that can best be addressed in programs targeted to their unique learning needs; these needs may not be well served by school choice alternatives that do not attend to exceptional learners.

The findings of this research draw attention to the challenges of choice within larger public high school settings. These challenges seem surmountable so long as students, teachers, and administrators are committed both to ensuring equity of opportunity, and to building community across different groups of students. Our recommendations offer some simple and practical ways of addressing these issues.

Overall, it is our conclusion that choice within the public school system offers promise for high ability learners with idiosyncratic needs, those learners who very often do not otherwise experience a good educational fit. Schools-within-schools can be effective in providing

appropriately challenging curriculum within supportive public school settings. Such programs offer high-ability students the benefits of a small community of like-minded learners and of participation in a larger and more varied community. This model can work particularly well in public high schools with large physical plants that offer a diverse range of programs and courses.

The findings of this study confirm 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). Among these needs are balancing concerns about equity and excellence, reinforcing common goals, and enabling all students to benefit from the strengths of the entire school community (Tomlinson, Coleman, Allan, Udall & Landrum, 1996). Each of the three schools in this study sought to address simultaneously the goals of differentiated gifted programming and harmonious co-existence by providing high-ability programs while sharing classrooms, teachers, extracurricular activities, and resources across the school. Although there were many successes, these cases also highlight some challenges.

Choice allows students to enter programs that better serve their educational needs and interests. It is the combination of specialization and smallness, not economic efficiencies, that seem key to their success. For high ability students, school-within-school programs within large public high schools offer the possibility of combining the advantages of both small and large schools. Maple Heights, with its range of special programs—serving needs as diverse as gifted, special education, visual art, drama, business, and technical studies—seems a good example of a school-within-a-school that benefits from both distinct and shared identities.

Special schools-within-a-school, like pilot schools, offer the possibility of targeting the unique challenges of exceptionally capable students. Their presence in larger schools results in additional challenges in terms of program and school culture, as well as possibilities for 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.



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Table 1  
Description of the Cases

School Name	School <i>n</i> (% of school <i>n</i> )	High-Ability <i>n</i>	Special Program	Program Extent	Admissions Criteria
Maple Heights	2000	450 (23%)	Gifted	Academic courses, Gr. 9-11; AP	IQ 130+
Sprucedale	1900	240 (13%)	Science	Academic courses, Gr. 9-11; AP, research	Math and science exam scores, teacher recom'ns, school grades, and essay
Pineview	1200	250 (21%)	International Baccalaureate	Gr. 9-12	>80% in pre-IB