

Gifted Education Plan in the United Arab Emirates

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Abstract

Gifted education is one of the major educational priorities in the UAE. Therefore, a national plan for gifted education was developed to realize the right of gifted students to receive appropriate programming to develop their particular levels of giftedness in general intellectual ability, specific academic subjects, and creativity. The purpose of this presentation is to describe the identification and programming processes portrayed in the national plan. Identification is an essential part of the plan. Principles, stages, and methodology of identification are discussed. Five key principles of identification are defensibility, advocacy, equity, comprehensiveness, and pragmatism. Identification is a three-stage process involving nomination, screening, and selection. Objective assessment methods, such as testing for ability, academic achievement, and creativity, are key aspects of the identification process. The Wisconsin Comprehensive Integrated Gifted Programming Model was adapted as a programming framework for gifted students in the UAE. The model is compatible with the national plan's philosophy of meeting the needs of the majority of students in regular classrooms and school settings. The model specifies three levels of programming options: The basic level includes programming options for students whose primary needs can be met through regular classroom differentiation. The intermediate level includes programming options for students whose primary needs require social group programming beyond the regular classroom. The advanced level includes programming options for students who need individualized services beyond regular classroom differentiation or special group programming.

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I would like begin by thanking the organizer and the co-organizer of this conference. I am delighted to be here and share with you our national plan for gifted education in the United Arabic Emirates (UAE).

I will talk particularly about two things in our plan: the identification of gifted students and programming for gifted students. I also will talk about gifted education in general in the UAE and about the National Plan for Enrichment of Education in the UAE.

Gifted education is one of the major educational priorities in the UAE and is a cornerstone of a plan recently adopted by the Ministry of Education. However, gifted education, in general, is relatively new in the UAE, as well as in other Arab countries. Although it began in the late 1980s, gifted education was given minimal attention in the UAE because there was more of a concern about the other extreme of the intellectual spectrum, namely, students with mental retardation or learning disabilities.

In 2007, however, the Ministry of Education tested a draft plan that was developed by the German University of Ulm. We invited experts from that university to develop our National Plan for Gifted Education. Then the plan was reviewed, modified, and revised by our regional and local experts in 2009. After that, in the same year, the plan was mounted. The plan was developed in accordance with the standards of the U.S. National Association for Gifted Children (NACG), the most prestigious association for gifted education in the entire world. NACG standards reflect a solid, high-quality gifted education program.

The identification of gifted students is an essential part of the UAE national plan, for a program is only as good the students it serves. Thus, the selection, or identification, process is key to the quality of the program. The UAE national plan follows certain goals and principles for identifying gifted students, and a committee meets regularly to make sure that the principles are in fact being followed.

First, we have to make sure that we use the right procedure to identify the types of giftedness that we are aiming at. The national plan focuses on three types of giftedness: intellectual giftedness in general; giftedness in specific academic giftedness – especially math and science; and creative giftedness. Inclusion, rather than exclusion, is a particular aim: Our main goal is to identify those students who have enrolled in the right program not to exclude students who are not eligible for identification —so, inclusion rather than exclusion.

In pursuit of these aims, we use both subjective and objective tools, experiments, in our identification. We use multiple resources for identification; we do not rely on just one source

such as people do in some places where they use only IQ or intelligence tests for identification. All of these tools and resources make it more likely that our identification of any particular student as gifted is correct.

We begin our identification process as early as possible. We start with children in the first, second, or third grade to increase the likelihood that no talented student will remain undiscovered. The early identification process is ongoing; it is not a one-shot deal. It should be continuous throughout the areas of education that students are going into.

We have to make sure that the students who enter the program are in fact eligible for the program; that is, we do not place students into the program just to satisfy an institutional quota. Our aim is to make sure that the student is eligible, has the abilities and capacities to perform in the program. Of course, if no students are identified as eligible for joining the program, there will be no program.

We follow a three-stage model for identifying students: nomination, screening, and selection. Each stage has its own process and methods. Students will be nominated for consideration by their teachers, their parents, peers, or, sometimes, themselves. Students are nominated by the three or four sources, or will be considered for later screening.

We use different nomination tools for identification. We have developed a checklist for teachers. Teachers do not just say, "I nominate so-and-so." Instead, they have to fill out a form, making sure that the student in fact has the characteristics targeted. A checklist of characteristics for different students in the aforementioned three areas helps teachers decide whom to nominate. Students who score high on those characteristics will be nominated by the teacher, parent, peers, or themselves for further consideration.

In nominating students for the gifted program, we use test scores—especially the related achievement scores. We look at students' records throughout the years of their education, average these scores, and consider them as a source of nomination. For students who have portfolios, we look at the portfolios for things that those students have achieved. Also considered are teachers' reports of consultations or conferences about students. Any background information about a student—for example, the world that the student comes from, a family of gifted individuals, and whether the student has siblings who were in the program before—is considered as a factor in nominating that student. In this manner, we gather a talent pool.

Then, the students who were nominated are screened by objective, standardized tools or experiments. We use assessment for the students who were nominated at the first stage. Different types of experiments are mainly a performance and a test. The performance we gained (with permission) from the student's prior achievements, as indicated in the student's record. We also use tests of ability, standard achievement tests, and the activity test for identification in the earlier mentioned three major areas of giftedness.

In the last stage, we use the collective data from the first and second stages to make the final selection of students. The earlier mentioned identification committee meets and selects students for particular gifted programs. No single experiment or criterion should be used. Instead, the committee uses multiple criteria, gathered from multiple sources, to reach its decisions. Both qualitative and quantitative data will be used in selecting students.

In offering students programs that are aimed at meeting their needs, we had to adapt a framework from international program models. We adapted the Wisconsin Comprehensive Integrated Gifted Programming Model, a model with which I am familiar because I graduated from the University of Wisconsin. In using this model, we classify students into the three levels of giftedness. We are targeting the top 5 percent of the students in each of the three

aforementioned areas of giftedness—intellectual giftedness, academic giftedness, and creativity—and classify them into three percentile ranges: the 95th and 96th percentile, the 97th and 98th percentile, and the 99th percentile—the top category, comprising 1 percent of the country's population.

The gifted students at all levels are offered different programming options, with three different levels. At the basic level, students will be receiving programming options within their regular classroom. The students do not have to leave their classrooms, and the teachers know who the gifted students are.

Many students in that program will be receiving programming options, such as where the teacher may modify the curriculum that he or she uses with the regular students to meet the needs of the gifted students. The latter will be taught thinking skills. A teacher will be trained to revise the curriculum appropriately, in accordance with a method called “compacting” in which the teacher gives just the information that is essential, without giving any details that might bore the gifted students. Maybe somebody has mentioned that most of the gifted students are bored in the classroom because the material is very easy and very boring.

The second level of programming options will be provided beyond the regular classroom. Students will be pulled from their classrooms in order to receive special activities such as a particular enrichment program or even an entire enrichment curriculum, as well as other enrichment activities. They will be grouped flexibly in order to meet each student's needs. At the top level, when the student may be at the highest level or when the student is at the end of his or her formal education, the student will be receiving different programming options in forms of individualized services with an emphasis on mentorship. Currently, we are entering into discussions with scientists to have them become mentors to our gifted students, who will then be linked with other scientists throughout the world in order to gain knowledge from those who are in the field.

The third level of program options consists of individual studies: Students will be asked to do special projects on their own, guided by their mentors, in order to complete the project. Fellowships are given to those in the programs to go abroad and complete their higher education in the West or, indeed, in any country they wish, depending on their area of specialization and the type of education they seek.

So, we have three levels. Many students' needs will be met in the classroom, some students' needs will be met outside the classroom, and a few students' needs will be met individually.

Among the functions supporting the programming are counseling for the students, staff development, and special provision of the government. Also, I think it is very important to involve parents, some of whom otherwise might object to certain aspects of the program or hesitate to enroll their children in it. Finally, coordination and partnership with schools and other agencies play a large role in the plan for identification and programming for gifted education in the UAE.