

INNOVATION IN INCLUSIVE EDUCATION: COMPREHENSIVE PROGRAMS FOR THE GIFTED AND TALENTED IN THE PHILIPPINES

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Abstract

In the light of Inclusive Education, the presence of comprehensive programs for the gifted and talented (PGT) learners in all levels of basic education is warranted to respond to their specific educational needs. This paper explored PGT in the Philippines through the frame provided by the harmonized definition of Philippine Inclusive Education gleaned from the focus group discussions and workshops conducted, and within the context of the K-12 system which is characterized with inclusiveness. Existing PGT, consistent with Philippine policy, emphasize specialization in the areas of science and technology, arts and sports. Except for sports, specialized high schools have been established to further content knowledge and competencies within specialized tracks that eventually lead into related professions. Workshop participants indicated the diverse needs of those under the gifted label. Questions regarding how the gifted from indigenous communities, identified gifted who are underachieving, the twice-exceptional, and gifted students enrolled in special schools who intend to pursue other interests alongside their specialized tracks, can

be given programs that allow them to meet their potential. Implications of the new frame of inclusiveness would entail a deeper study of the identification process at the elementary levels, nature of support services needed, and the enhancement of the General Education program.

Keywords: inclusive education, gifted education, talent development

Introduction

Documents reviewed for PGT indicate an early interest of the Philippine government in investing in learners deemed to be “specially gifted”. The 1935 Philippine Constitution was the oldest Philippine legislation implicated in nurturing this specific group. The same sentiment could be noted in succeeding versions of the Philippine Constitution. Presidential Decree No. 603 (1974), otherwise known as the Child and Youth Welfare Code, expounded on the ways that identified gifted children from all walks of life, especially from the “indigent but deserving students”, can be assisted in order to meet their potential. The policies that advocate for equalizing access to education for those deemed as gifted and talented are inclusive, which is based on the premise that the State acts to remove the barriers to quality education and allows them to meet their full potential to help attain the State’s aims. Other forms of support can be seen in the institutionalization of PGT, presence of scholarships and training, and in the want to improve the General Education system.

Existing Programs for the Gifted and their Corresponding Funding

Several PGT have been institutionalized. The Philippine High School for the Arts (PHSA) through Presidential Decree No. 1287 (1978) and Executive Order No. 420 (1990); and the Philippine Science High School (PSHS) System via Republic Acts 7687 (1994) and 8496 (1997), which have their own mandates on admission and governance, and exist outside of the Department of Education (DepEd) programs. RA 7687 has provided funding for science and technology programs through the Department of Science and Technology (DOST) since 1994. Section 5 stated that “the budget of the DOST shall be increased in the amount of Sixty million pesos (P60M) per year until it eventually reaches the amount of Three hundred million pesos (P300M) to sustain the recipients of the scholarship during the duration of their study”. On the other hand, RA 7356 includes funding for the arts but unlike RA 7687, it does not specify what portion goes into scholarships and research. It is apparent that the nurturance of those gifted in sciences is prioritized over those who are gifted in the arts and in sports.

The policy adheres to a rigid standard of academic capabilities, health and character. It does not discriminate based on gender, religion, and cultural affiliation. Hence as long as a student meets the three criteria stated below, he or she can qualify for the science and technology\scholarships. The learners must be:

- a) a member of the top five percent (5%) of the high school graduating class, regardless of gender, religion, and cultural affiliation;
- b) a resident of the municipality for the last four (4) years prior to availing of the scholarship, as attested by the school records; and
- c) of good moral character and in good health.

The policy includes a provision to balance the distribution of the scholarship slots through the organization of a program that enlists at least two scholars in each municipality of the Philippines and at least 10 scholars for congressional districts without municipality. An explicit statement that gives due preference to the ‘qualified cultural minority’ [the ethnocentric use of language was noted] in appropriate cases can be seen in Section 10. It can be construed as an effort to include the Indigenous Peoples and Muslims who are gifted.

Other gifted and talented are served through public and private schools. Only the PGT in the public schools documented in the DepEd Orders (DO) are mentioned in this paper, the first of which are those that use special curricula focused on science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM), which is believed to help hasten the advancement of the country, are as follows:

- Special Science Elementary School (SSES). An educational intervention designed to develop children who have keen interest and exceptional abilities in science and math. Budget allocation equally divided among the 104 implementing schools at Php352,000.^{.00} per recipient school (DO 20, 2015).
- Regional Science High School (RSHS). A program aimed to strengthen Science and Math education by offering an accelerated curriculum on science and math and information and technology with required courses and a wide selection of electives and opportunities for independent student research. Each of the 17 public secondary schools in 17 regions implementing the RSHS program is allotted Php1,150,000.^{.00}, equivalent to Php2,000.^{.00} per student (DO 20, 2015).
- Science, Technology and Engineering (STE) Program designed to strengthen science and math education and delivered through special science classes in selected public secondary schools nationwide. According to DO 55 (2010), the curricula of science, mathematics, English, and technology and livelihood education were enriched. Currently allotted Php270,000.^{.00} for each of the 198 implementing schools while Php180,000.^{.00} for each of the two school in the ARMM in its second year of implementation (DO 20, 2015).

There are programs for those deemed gifted but have not been placed in any of the STEM tracks. They exist within the Headstart classes for pre-schoolers deemed to be gifted, the Special Education (SPED) Centers that have programs for learners identified to be gifted and talented in the elementary level, and the secondary schools that have the special program for sports (SPS) and/or the special program for the arts (SPA). A national sports program called the *Palarong Pambansa* engages secondary students with potential/talents in sports to train for and participate in yearlong sports activities. Aside from this national event, identified athletes in secondary schools with SPS also train in the following sports: archery, *arnis*, athletics, badminton, baseball, chess, football, gymnastics, *sepak takraw*, softball, swimming, table tennis, *tae kwon do*, tennis and volleyball. While a nationwide program for secondary students with potential and talents in the arts enrich their abilities in music, visual arts, theater arts, media arts, creative writing, and dance through the SPA. Documents show that 17 public schools (one per region) receive funding for SPA. The most recent (DO 20, 2015) providing Php500,000.^{.00} for each of the 17 public secondary schools, one school per region, that has special programs in either the arts or sports, or both.

Information regarding educational programs concurs with the RDFCEI (2014, pp. 13-14) findings that educational services were found to be focused on providing segregated and specialized services rather than inclusive education. Also, that there is a shared view among stakeholders that inclusive education means educational access, regardless of mode of delivery. It is possible that these are due to budgetary constraints and the recognition that diverse needs of the learner can be addressed through different modes of delivery. Addressing this group's needs should not be detriment to service given to other groups.

Diversity within the Gifted and Talented Label

The entry of Republic Acts 10157 (2012) and 10533 (2013) and their Implementing Rules and Regulations (DO 42, 2012; and DO 43, 2013, respectively), which created the foundation for the K-12 system adopted, implied the restructuring of services given in the form of comprehensive programs for the gifted and talented, programs for those with disabilities, Madrasah Education, Indigenous Peoples Education program, and programs for learners under difficult circumstances. The research team described existing DepEd programs and explored gaps that may be filled for the K-12 system to be truly inclusive. As part of this research, the existing PGT were documented through desk review and focus group discussions (FGDs) with participants from the DepEd's Central and Regional Offices. The FGDs were used to elicit insights regarding learners under the gifted and talented label whose needs may yet to be addressed.

Policy has clear indications of who are the Philippines' gifted – those deemed to be most useful in attaining the nation's development goals – and are accorded support. One of the questions asked of the workshop participants was regarding possible types of learners that may not have access to the basic education system. The working group focused on the PGT emphasized that although the gifted population may not have difficulty in accessing the General Education program, a question of whether or not appropriate support services are given arose. According to the group, there is diversity in within the “gifted and talented” label and in order to improve the DepEd's service, comprehensive PGTs were necessary for the following groups:

- the Indigenous Peoples' gifted given access to the General Education classroom;
- underachieving gifted, who may be given access to the regular classroom or to the school through alternative delivery modes (ADM) such as the Open High School, distance study program, Project Reach, and even alternative learning system (ALS);
- the twice-exceptional student, who can be enrolled in the regular classroom or be given homebound instruction and participation in school activities for socialization. They are gifted students who have a co-morbid condition such as the presence of Asperger Syndrome, Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity disorder, or an emotional and/or behavior disorder, or a disability that is either physical, sensorial or learning- related; and
- gifted students enrolled in special schools, who desire participation in school activities outside of their own.

According to the workshop participants, learners assessed as ‘twice-exceptional’ but are not enrolled in the General Education classroom may be given access to it through the Project Sakay/shuttle service, wheelchair program, orientation and mobility, and distance study programs [if the reasons for not participating are related to transport and mobility]. Provisions given in DO 72 (2009) that are aimed to increase the participation rate of

children through inclusion confirm the claim of workshop participants that access to education was provided to all these types of learners. The needs of those who considered to be twice-exceptional are not limited to physical access to the schools. There are times when the nature of the co-morbid condition interfere with achievement often related to the gifted populations, thus, resulting in a situation wherein the twice-exceptional are not accorded support services that can help them reach their potential. There were no noted programs in the public school system's General Education program to address these needs at the time the study was conducted.

In a related study (RDFCEI, 2014), the belief that nurturing potentially gifted students would mean that they would serve the country seems to be apparent in the intended practice of reverse inclusion "wherein a fast learner in a SPED center takes on the task of watching over the child with disability providing some form of assistance to the SPED teacher" (p. 13). Fast learners are assumed to be within the gifted/talented population and are educated within the SPED center at the elementary levels and in specialized high schools. In relation to their placement, two things must be considered. First, the levels of proficiency within the K-12 basic education system can allow fast learners to be included in the General Education program. They can be considered Advance learners, differentiating them from the Beginning and Developing learners and those who are Approaching Proficiency and those who are Proficient. The second point would be related to budgetary allotment. If the fast learners can be accommodated in the General Education classroom, then the SPED centers can focus on those with disabilities and learners who were formally assessed to be moderately to profoundly gifted, therefore, needing a highly specialized educational program.

In the Policies and Guidelines in Special Education in the Philippines (DepEd, 2008), only 'gifted/talented' is listed as a category. The terms such as fast learners, Indigenous Peoples' gifted, underachieving gifted, and the twice-exceptional are not mentioned as part of the gifted/talented group of learners. There may be a need to clarify these exceptionalities within the gifted label to figure out who among the gifted/talented can be nurtured within the General Education system, and who among them necessitate separate and/or supplementary programs.

Multiple Schemes for Managing Gifted Programs

The governance of gifted programs comes in multiple management schemes. Within the General Education public school system, the SPA and SPS are currently present in 17 secondary schools (one school per region). These are led by committees within DepEd under the Office of the Assistant Secretary for Special Projects and are the most inclusive forms of gifted programs in the public schools. Providing more schools with SPA and SPS is a move towards developing more learners gifted in these areas.

There are programs that remove identified gifted/talented from the General Education program. The existence of these segregated programs confirms contradictions observed by the workshop participants about Inclusive Education conceptualizations, specifically the concept that views the "curriculum as not just integration, but contextualization". There seems to be a recognition that this group of learners need more than what the General Education program can provide. These segregated programs are well supported by legislation and are spurred by Proclamation No. 199's (1999) assertions that:

- the gifted and talented are the nation's most important human resources that can help address society's need for strong leadership;
- the Philippine government should provide every gifted and talented person with opportunities, encouragement, greater attention, and assistance to develop his potentials to the fullest;
- there is a growing concern among parents and other stakeholders to address the needs of children who are gifted and talented through appropriate services so that they will eventually be able to serve the country as scientists, inventors, technologists, artists, innovators, and leaders;
- the goal of the state is the pursuit of excellence as reflected in the provision of special, appropriate, and relevant programs and services to effectively harness their gifts.

The unbalanced development of programs for arts and sports as compared to programs in Science and Technology shows the State's priorities in terms of support for a specific gifted group. Article XIV, Section 10 of the 1987 Philippine Constitution provided a rationale for the development of these learners identifying Science and Technology as "essential for nationalism, development, invention, innovation, and their utilization." It situated the nurturance of scientific attitudes, technological skills, and higher order thinking skills in DepEd's hands with augmentation by the PHSA, DOST and the PSHS System. Although the gifted are recognized and placed in SPED centers and specialized schools, some gifted learners are educated in the PSHS system, PHSA, and private schools that are given State support. An emphasis of equity rather than equality seems to be existent in the provisions given to the gifted and talented.

State Support Accorded to the Gifted

The "creation of scholarships in arts, science, and letters for specially gifted" (Philippine Constitution, Article XIV, Section 5) is reiterated in a number of national policies that expanded its scope to scholarships for pioneers in the education of learners with special needs. There is a large fund for the gifted (RFDCEI, 2014); whether it is sufficient or not, depends on which sector is asked. If parents of gifted and talented children are asked, the support is limited to the point that if they can afford it, they would enrol their children in a private school with a more personalized program. Given that DepEd is responsible for providing basic education to all Filipinos, funding allotted to the PGT can be misconstrued as prioritizing a small sector of the targeted number of enrolled students. The desk review and workshops do show that funding is given to PGT in the form of support service and the provision of IMs. According to DO 15 (2014) the following services are given a budget:

- Conduct of investigatory projects and student researches relative to the program;
- Participation of pupils in development activities such as leadership training workshops, seminars, and conferences related to the program;
- Purchase of assessment materials and payment for services of psychologists and psychometricians in the screening and identification of entrants;
- Minor repairs and maintenance of facilities and devices such as science model apparatuses and scientific tools and equipment;
- Student development activities such as participation in DepEd-approved festivals and competitions;
- Professional training and development of Science and Math teachers and school heads including participation in related seminars, conferences, and workshops;
- Professional training and development of teachers and school heads, including

participation in Arts- and Sports-related seminars, conferences, and workshops;
and

- Purchase of supplies related to arts and sports, which include costumes/uniforms in the different arts/sports areas.

All these work to improve the existing PGTs within the DepEd's jurisdiction.

Teachers of the gifted/talented are the priority

Historically, the gifted learner is found within the context of SPED, a field that celebrated its Philippine institutional centennial in 2008. It is possible that the response of teacher scholarships for students with exceptionalities and disabilities through Republic Acts 5250 (1968) and 5549 (1969) found its recipients assigned to SPED, as they were educated to be stewards of those who cannot be accommodated in the General Education classroom. In the interest of providing appropriate education to learners with exceptionalities, these programs produced pioneer teachers in the field of SPED. This may have been the reason for clumping the gifted and learners with disabilities in the SPED centers together.

In relation to Section 2 of RA 10612, which aims to “strengthen the country’s science and technology education by fast tracking graduates in the sciences, mathematics, and engineering who shall teach science and mathematics subjects in secondary schools throughout the country,” DO 79 (2012) provided guidelines for the promotion of Math and Science teachers, including items that are three salary grades higher with the attainment of their master’s degree in science and/or mathematics.

Teachers in SPED, science and mathematics are recognized with incentives. This may become a hindrance in collaboration based on the experience of SPED teachers (RDFCEI, 2014, p. 14). Nevertheless, the DepEd’s effort to provide support and incentives to teachers in SPED, Science, and Math is a noteworthy.

There is an assumption that the gifted and talented are foreseen to be leaders, a term which can be interpreted in many ways – leaders of industry, leaders in the field of their choice, and also leaders of the nation in the future. The present programs for science, technology, and the arts respond to the first two types, hence, it is logical for the system to form special schools for them. If they are to this nation’s future leaders, then the question of why they are segregated would arise. Leadership and other enrichment opportunities within the General Education system are seen in the private schools. Can it be the same for those in the public schools? It is possible that the inclusiveness of a school is not always addressed in the academic programs; but through co- and extra-curricular activities. Data on existing school clubs and student organizations could help in crafting programs for enrichment within the General Education system.

The ideal learning environment

DO 57 (2011) stipulated that the provision of an appropriate learning environment for the gifted and talented is one that is achieved through the special curricula, which “recognizes multiple intelligences geared towards the development of God-loving, globally competitive, nationalistic, creative, ecologically aware, scientifically- and technologically-oriented, and skilled individuals who are empowered through lifelong learning skills.” The aforementioned learning environment should be given to all types of learners. If education is seen as formative, then the General Education system has to

aspire for this kind of environment because every person in it can be nurtured by it. Further study on how it can be accorded to all schools is recommended.

Realistically, this environment can start with installing a resource room with support staff trained to create responsive programs, projects, and activities for learners that may need their services, expanding to the administration of standardized intelligence and achievement tests and student tracking and programming. Eventually, with the collective efforts of various professionals and schools, an organized delivery of support services through the resource room can be achieved.

A more in-depth study on the kind of learning environment and instructional materials made available to learners in both the public school's General Education program and the PGT in order to (1) determine the best approximation of the PGT learning environment that the General Education program can aim for given the needs of the learners it serves and its current budget and resources; and (2) analyze how the General Education program can provide the learning environment and instructional materials that the PGT require and to explore the possibility of fast learners being accommodated in the General Education program.

Conclusion

In the light of Inclusive Education, where the quality of education can be measured by the appropriateness of the programs provided, the presence of PGT is warranted as it responds to specific needs of the gifted and talented. The current programs are successful in catering to those who are gifted in science and technology, arts and sports. It is vital that they receive continuous support in the forms of scholarships, grants and teacher training. Alongside PGT maintenance, the DepEd must continue on improving the General Education program to allow it to benefit all types of learners.

Noted was a need to expand the programs to lend extra support to identified groups of learners within the gifted and talented label. These diverse needs to be addressed with appropriate programming. This commences with a well-defined assessment process of giftedness that is upheld by a multi-disciplinary team of experts using, at the very least, the combined results of a battery of standardized intelligence and achievement tests, previous school records, and nomination and recommendation forms. It much then be augmented with an effective student tracking system to ensure that identified gifted students' achievement match their potential in their area of specialization.

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