

New Strategies for Gifted Advocacy

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Gifted advocates can benefit from rudimentary knowledge of several theories from the field of political science. In my 2007 NAGC session, *New Strategies for Gifted Advocacy*, I gave participants an overview of Kingdon's (1984) multiple streams theory, Baumgartner and Jones's (2002) punctuated equilibrium theory, and Mancur Olson's (1965) logic about collective action. I also shared humorous, but time-tested nuggets from Saul Alinsky's *Rules for Radicals* (1971), which I encountered in an advanced education policy course for superintendents and principals during my Ph.D. coursework.

In his multiple streams theory, Kingdon (1984) identified three streams—the problem stream consisting of problems identified by the public, experts, and/or others; the policy stream consisting of policy solutions proposed primarily by experts; and the politics stream consisting of everyone acting in the in the political arena trying to change laws and policies. Change happens when the three streams merge together, when the identified problems meet the proposed solutions in the political arena. Gifted education change happens when identified problems (e.g., children unchanged by curricula; businesses unable to find local talent, etc), meet proposed policy solutions (e.g., increased use of acceleration, improved teacher training, etc.) in the political arena (e.g. local school board meetings, state school board meetings, legislative committees, etc.)

To place gifted problems and solutions on the political radar screen, perhaps gifted advocates need to phrase problems and solutions in terms like accountability, or perhaps gifted advocates need to overcome elitist perceptions that inhibit some politicians from voting in favor of gifted programs. The precise “place it in the politician's faces” strategy depends on the level of politics involved (federal, state, local), depends on other issues facing those politicians, and depends on what voters understand and desire.

According to Baumgartner and Jones's (2002) punctuated equilibrium theory, long periods of no change (equilibrium) happen when negative feedback processes repel outsiders and quell dissent in an effort to keep policy-making hidden in policy monopolies. We do some of this in gifted education; our gifted coordinators and teachers endeavor to keep parents happy, to quell dissent, to keep decision-making about gifted education within our own organizations, at our own conferences, and within our state department of education gifted offices. Power in political monopolies comes from autonomy from the broader political arena. Autonomy is created by the use of jargon and by claims that experts

are needed. Within our gifted field we use special language that makes it difficult for outsiders to enter our realm. We claim that gifted experts are needed to make gifted-related decisions. I've used that special language and made those claims myself.

Baumgartner and Jones (2002) claim that change happens, in other words the equilibrium is punctured, when positive feedback processes build together and reach a tipping point. Positive feedback processes include whatever might happen to cause people to desire change. Negative feedback processes, by contrast, quell dissent and thus maintain equilibrium. When positive feedback processes are happening, public attention might shift from one underlying element of the policy issue to another underlying element of the policy issue. For instance, the public might be concerned about education finance as a property tax issue one day, but the next day the public might be concerned with education finance as a national security issue.

Whether and when change happens depends on how issues are portrayed, what symbols are used, and which institutions have jurisdiction over the issues. Periods of policy punctuation often include changes in intensities of interest, changes in public images associated with the policy, and changes in “institutional jurisdiction”—perhaps a new government department is formed, or a new system of schools are developed, or a new organization is founded. Periods of punctuation might also include emotional public campaigns capable of trumping experts such as policy-analysts, lobbyists, and attorneys. Punctuations in the equilibrium occur when policy image changes and institutional changes combine.

What we do in order to “punctuate” the gifted education “equilibrium” that has existed for so many years? How can we convince legislatures and others that we need big improvements in the ways we educate gifted children? First, we must recognize that mollifications, those negative feedback processes that quell dissent, also make change less likely. Second, we must recognize any positive feedback processes that currently exist, and perhaps give those change-inducing processes a boost by attaching images and emotional appeals to those processes. The Russian launch of Sputnik in 1958 was a tremendous boost for gifted education; our country, filled with emotional images of Russian superiority, quickly increased the level of science and math education in our schools.

Currently we have an unpopular federal law, *No Child Left Behind*, which is creating havoc with gifted programming around the country and swaying financially able parents to move their children to private schools. Perhaps we can capture and spread emotional, image-laden stories about the influences of that law on gifted children, and in particular on low income gifted children. Perhaps we can juxtapose those stories with

facts from the business world and graduate schools about how they continue to import talent in the sciences, technology, engineering, and math from foreign country due to a lack of such talent developed in our nation's schools.

When I first encountered Mancur Olson's 1965 book *The Logic of Collective Action* during my political science studies, I wished I had read it years before I started organizing gifted parents into advocacy groups. In addition to being an exciting experience for logical minds, the book offers insights into why some advocacy groups grow and others dissolve. Olson's work on the logic of collective action should be shared with leaders of state and local gifted organization in order to improve the internal dynamics of those organizations.

In a nutshell, Olson taught us that people join a group in order to receive benefits from the group. We join the American Automobile Association for the maps and free towing, not because we agree with its legislative agenda. We join the American Association of Retired Person for the discounts, not because we agree with its legislative agenda. Individuals will join gifted organizations for benefits now, not for legislation later.

As Olson (1965) explained, if we want to attract people to an advocacy group, we must offer benefits that people cannot obtain elsewhere. Some gifted groups offer Saturday programs for children of members. Some offer newsletters or discounts on NAGC membership fees. Some offer monetary help with attending NAGC or state gifted conferences. Some offer social time with other parents of gifted children. Advocacy groups that grow understand the fact that most people are self-interested.

Saul Alinsky's book *Rules for Radicals* (1971) similarly tells the truth about people. Because people are comforted by the familiar and shocked by the unfamiliar, Alinsky advises advocates to comfort your allies and surprise your opponents. If you wish to build a coalition, don't walk into an Orthodox Jewish neighborhood while eating a ham sandwich. Alinsky teaches us to embrace the duality inherent in all arguments; we understand, anticipate, and respond to counterarguments. We must see the entire picture, not just our small corner.

As gifted advocates, we might take Alinsky's lessons to heart by expanding our worldview from gifted education to education in general to society at large to global concerns. We might anticipate and understand what parents of non-gifted students might say to school board members when we lobby for change on the local level. Some of us are beginning to discuss whether we should change our terminology from the "ham sandwich" term "gifted" to something more palatable to our potential allies.

I encourage gifted advocates to learn more about political science theories that might be used successfully to gifted education advocacy. I also encourage gifted

advocates to continue to share policy successes with one another, perhaps within the Conceptual Foundations Division, or perhaps within an as-yet uncreated NAGC division devoted to political and policy issues.

References

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