

Tinker, Tailor, Soldier, Sailor, Scientist, Mathematician, Leader of the Free World: Did graduates of the Major Work program in Winnipeg live up to expectations?

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Abstract:

In the wake of Cold War fears of a Russian takeover, North America turned to its gifted and talented children, whom they sought to nurture as scientists, mathematicians, engineers and community leaders to keep our liberty and dominate in the newly begun space race. Throughout North America, gifted and talented programs, which had previously gone in and out of favour in the education landscape of the early twentieth century, sprung up for children in the late elementary and middle years of school. One such program was the Major Work program in Winnipeg, Canada, which lasted from 1954 – 1972.

The author conducted case-study research in 2017 – 2018 about the Winnipeg Major Work program. Former students, teachers and parents were surveyed and/or interviewed about students' experiences in the program and educational and career choices following the program. This article examines career choices of Winnipeg Major Work students and how they matched the overall expectations of the program.

Introduction:

As we had practiced numerous times, we moved quickly from our rows of desks to the line at the classroom door where we stood, side by side with a partner. At the teacher's instruction, we moved quietly – through the hallway and down the stairs, with the first pair stopping on the bottom stair and each pair successively coming to rest on the stair above until 13 of the 16 stairs were occupied by children sitting cowering, their heads in their laps, on either side of the stair so the teacher could descend through the middle to keep an eye on us from ground level. The wail of the air raid siren, as the tone increased, then decreased again over a period of what seemed to us hours, echoed through the building while each class sheltered in their assigned, glass-free zones and we hoped that this was just an air raid drill and not a Russian 'bomb', whatever that was. We were just kids – we wavered between fear and just wanting to get it over and return to whatever project we were working on in our classrooms.

The Cold War, which in 1947 followed closely after World War II, lasted until 1991, with the 1989 downing of the Berlin Wall and the dissolution of the Soviet Union. Its impact on North America was immense. Fears of a communist takeover, Russia possessing the bomb and the Soviets beating the rest of the world in space exploration caused considerable angst both in Canada and in the United States. By 1954, approval was given for a US-funded Distant Early Warning (DEW) Line to be built across the Canadian arctic, Alaska, Greenland and Iceland (Stursberg, 1959). By 1957, 63 radar stations were opened across the Arctic, largely run by the Royal Canadian Air Force. Their mission was to detect early any signs of a Russian invasion on North America. Former Major Work student, M, reflects on her husband's childhood on the DEW line:

It was the Cold War years, so vigilance was prudence. My [husband] was born in 1945... His Dad was in the signals area of the army so he grew up in the north on the DEW line watching for the Russians to come across the arctic to invade us. [He] lived in Aklavik, Inuvik, Norman Wells, Fort Good Hope and small outposts with radio and radar detection equipment.

The Cold War and the 1957 launch of Sputnik, the Soviet's triumph as the first artificial satellite to be launched into space, sparked a renewal in gifted education programs in North America. Gifted programs had gone through periods of popularity, particularly after the 1916 introduction of the Stanford-Binet Intelligence Test (IQ), and periods of decline, where claims that IQ 'giftedness' definitions were too narrow, elitist and didn't consider creativity, originality, temperament and personality (Gold, 1984). Prior to World War II, most North American gifted programs had been discontinued.

But the threat of a Communist takeover led decision-makers in North America to turn to their natural resource of gifted children as a means of producing the scientists, mathematicians, engineers and politicians they deemed necessary to combat Russian advances. By 1952, superintendent of Winnipeg Schools, W.C. Lorimer, highlighted the importance of schools nurturing future leaders from amongst their most gifted students, warning of the hazards of "not doing everything we should for people who are superior" (Winnipeg Free Press, 1952). The following year, Chicago's Northwestern University director of Psychoeducational Clinic and author of *The Gifted Child*, Paul Witty, reported that the United States had undervalued its gifted students, individuals who should become "the country's future leaders in business, education, journalism, labor, scientific research, and government (Robins, 2010, p. 118).

With general consensus regarding the value of nurturing bright students, gifted education programs, whose popularity had waned prior to World War II, reappeared throughout North America as a means of redressing the Soviet dilemma and even surpassing them in the space race. Surprisingly though, the scientists, mathematicians, engineers and social leaders these programs aspired to produce were not necessarily the fruits of their labours.

This article is based on case-study research of one such program: the *Major Work* program, delivered to selected students between Grades 4 and 9, in the years from 1954 and 1972 in the Winnipeg, Manitoba region of Canada. The research, with a survey participant rate of 172, was conducted as an online survey followed by voluntary attendance at a focus group, held in Vancouver, Winnipeg, Toronto and London, or individual interviews in person or virtually. This article examines longitudinally students' educational and career trajectories and whether they actually met the societal expectation of producing the scientists, mathematicians, engineers and social leaders North America claimed it needed at the time.

A Brief History of Giftedness and Gifted Programs

Passow (2004) credits Guy M. Whipple's 1920 publication in the *Cyclopedia of Education* with coining the word 'gifted' to describe highly intelligent and highly achieving children. The term 'gifted' was a direct descendent from other, less flattering labels given to children of high intelligence, such as 'precocious curiosities', 'candidates for the mental disorder' and 'dementia praecox' (Sorin, 2020) and some equally as praiseworthy terms, such as "pupils of more than average capability," "brilliant children," pupils of supernormal mentals" (Passow, 2004, p.2). At the time of Whipple's decree, these children were allocated to 'rapid advancement', 'opportunity' 'special opportunity' and 'Major Work' classes throughout North America.

Giftedness has usually been defined as the highest one or two percent of the population in general intelligence, or according to IQ scores, such as 125 or 135 (Passow, 2004, p. 4). In 1931, Leta S. Hollingworth, who started gifted classes in New York, defined a gifted child as "one who is far more educable than the generality of children are" (Passow, 2004, p. 4). But by the 1940s, general intelligence scores were challenged, as they didn't include qualities such as creativity. As Pritchard (1951) explained, "Creativity points to originality, and originality implies successful management, control, and organisation of new materials or experience" (in Passow, 2004, p. 4) as opposed to standard intelligence tests which "contain over-learned materials" (Ibid). Further discourse over the years has identified the differences between intelligence and creativity, focusing on performances and achievement of gifted individuals, and examining family backgrounds and their contribution to giftedness (Ibid).

After an extensive literature review, Sternberg (2004) defines giftedness as follows:

"Giftedness involves more than just high IQ

- Giftedness has non-cognitive (eg. Motivationally driven) components as well as cognitive ones
- Environment is crucial in terms of whether potentials for gifted performance will be realised.
- Giftedness is not a single thing: There are multiple forms of giftedness...

Measures for identifying or evaluating gifted individuals need to be proposed to operationalise theories, and then they need to be evaluated rather than merely being assumed to be valid” (pp. xxiv – xxv).

In North America, gifted educational programs had won and lost favour over the first half of the twentieth century, based on social, economic and political needs and perceptions of the time. The focus on the gifted largely came to play with the 1916 introduction of the Stanford-Binet Intelligence Test, or IQ test by Stanford University’s Lewis Terman (Sorin, 2020). With IQ testing being rolled out throughout North America, a number of venues introduced special classes or programs for children deemed gifted, including the 1922 Cleveland ‘Major Work’ classes directed by Roberta Holden Bole. While gifted classes waned in popularity between their inceptions and the second world war, interest in them again emerged as a consequence of the 1947 start of the Cold War and the fear that the Russians would invade North America. It was during this period that Winnipeg’s Major Work program, largely based on Bole’s Cleveland program evolved (Sorin, 2020).

The program and other gifted programs throughout North America, grew and thrived during the latter part of the 50s and first half of the 60s, when interest began to shift due to the growing civil rights movement and the Americans being the first to land a person on the moon. By the early 70s, the Major Work program was terminated in Winnipeg and other locations and the call for equality and integration was louder than the need for scientists, mathematicians and engineers.

Major Work in Winnipeg

In a 1952 address to the Winnipeg Women’s Club, Dr Wesley Crawford Lorimer (1913 – 2010), Superintendent of Winnipeg Schools, stated that the education system seemed to cater to the ‘middle of the road’, rather than the top or bottom students. He noted, “We are in danger of not doing everything we should do for people who are superior. It is undesirable to teach every person the same, but we should educate the child to the limit of his ‘capacity’” (Winnipeg Free Press, 1952). To this end, the decision was made to start Major Work classes in Winnipeg schools. Students were given intelligence tests in Grade 3 and those with scores over 125 were offered places in Major Work classes, which they would attend from Grade 4 to Grade 9.

According to Major Work teacher Naomi Hersom (1962), the aim of the Major Work program in Winnipeg was “to encourage the development of latent abilities in superior children, but also to prevent the loss of their potential contribution to society by allowing poor work habits and attitudes to develop in the non-stimulating atmosphere of a classroom where others are not of the same calibre” (p. 59).

With increased child development and pedagogical knowledge and information gleaned from other education systems, the Major Work program was established in three schools in Winnipeg in 1954. The schools were: Queenston, Greenway and Machray. Each class had a maximum of 25 students, from the existing school and three or four neighbouring schools.

Enrichment activities in Major Work included special instruction in art; intensive language and literature, such as: preparing and presenting oral reports, reviewing books, writing poetry and prose, reading clubs, panels and debates; studying a foreign language (French); and often typing. The program was meant to be flexible and experimental, with no fixed way of teaching; to increase critical thinking, love of learning and skill and talent development. Integration with mainstream students was meant to occur through physical education, music, playground activities and school assemblies.

From 1955, the Major Work program expanded each year. The first cohort to graduate from elementary school, in 1956, continued in the program in Junior High School. In 1965, there were 66 Major Work classes in Winnipeg, led by Nadine Chidley, Director of Special Education in the Winnipeg School Division. However, due to ‘changed circumstances’, reported as: the introduction of team teaching; more individualized learning; and mainstream teachers using Major Work teaching methods, by 1968 the Major Work program was declining. It was recommended that Junior High Major Work classes be discontinued as of June 10, 1969. In January, 1970, the phasing out of elementary Major Work classes from September of that year was announced. The last cohort of elementary Major Work students finished in June, 1972 (Morgan and Colleagues, 1985).

Education and Career Paths

On October 14, 1967, an article written by Winnipeg Tribune staff member, Robin Taylor states that “the normal percentage of high school students that go through to university is between 25 and 30.” Citing the Winnipeg School Division No. 1’s 1967 Evaluation of the Major Work program, the article reiterated that of the 201 students surveyed, 82.6% responded to the survey and of those who responded, 83.8 had attended university after high school (Taylor, 1967).

Similarly, this research found that at least 88% of participants reported attending university. For many, they were the first in their families to do so: “I’m the only person in my family who went on to obtain a university degree (B. Comm. Hons.).” For some, it was for a brief period of time only. One reported, “After a year of university, still maintaining top marks, I decided to drop out. The pressure of exams was too much.” Another said, “When I started university, I went into ‘pre-med’ (because that’s what ‘smart’ kids do in my family) but couldn’t cope with the large classes and ice-cold competitiveness.”

Still others went to university, but not immediately after high school. A former student said, “I was married by age 21 to a young man with a farming upbringing. We bought a commercial turkey farm when I was 23...The economic environment of the 1980s was not kind to people with large debt so we were forced to sell the farm by about 1990. This opened up the opportunity for me to study Rural Development...Before I graduated, I was offered the job as manager of a Regional Development Corporation.”

Three participants spoke of continuing their education at a community college after high school and only 10 described career paths that did not include university studies.

Career changes were not common in early Baby Boomers, due to company attachment and defined benefit pension plans (Associated Press, 2016), but towards the end of the generation younger Baby Boomers began changing careers. A study by the US Bureau of Labor Statistics (Florida, 2015) found that multiple careers “became normal as early as the mid-1970s with the Baby Boom generation” (p.2). When asked about their careers, over 40% of participants named two or more careers. Some of these were similar in nature, such as lawyer and Law professor, but others were diverse, such as speech pathologist and lawyer. Each of the named careers was coded individually, so as to get a clearer picture of career choices for this group.

Keeping in mind that the aim of North American Cold War gifted programs was to develop scientists, mathematicians, engineers and social leaders, a hypothesis of this research was that science, mathematics and engineering would be the dominant career choices of Winnipeg Major Work graduates. The most popular career choice tells a different story. Table 1 – Career Choices (below) outlines participants’ career choices.

Table 1 – Career Choices

Career	Included jobs	Number of responses
Education	Elementary teacher; high school teacher; early childhood teacher; Art teacher; ESL teacher; special education teacher; education administrator, hospital arts teacher	42
Public service	Policy analyst; auditor; senior development officer; supervisor; superintendent	25
Health and Medicine	Doctor (including radiology, paediatrics, public health, family practice, psychiatry, dermatology, gastroenterology and emergency medicine); nurse (including clinical nurse specialist and nurse manager); dentist (including orthodontist); speech pathologist; pharmacist; nutritionist; dietician; occupational therapist; physiotherapist; hospital administrator	24
The Arts and Media	Actor; musician; visual artist; writer; singer; music critic; artistic director; theatre and dance consultant; arts program administrator; broadcaster; news director; digital publisher; architect	18
Law	Lawyer; judge; crown attorney	17
Finance	Economist; accountant; bank administrator; financial advisor; equity investor; chartered accountant	17
Academia	Education; Medicine and Health; Psychology; Law; Pharmacy; Biology; Statistics; Actuarial Mathematics; Biology	17
Business and Retail	Sales, real estate/ management, plumbing purchaser, buyer, sales manager, president/CEO, fashion industry buyer, business analyst, small business owner, auto industry manager, software manager, senior associate, NGO in the Netherlands	16
Computing	Trainer; program analyst; software developer; network designer	12
Writing	Technical writer; editor; digital publisher; copywriter; researcher; archivist	11
Science	Natural resource management; physics researcher; biologist; geologist; laboratory technician; research technologist	7
Psychology	Counsellor; employment counsellor; guidance counsellor; behaviour therapist	7
Engineering	Oil industry engineer; engineering management consultant; engineering technician	3
Social Work	Social worker; social work manager and policy analyst	3
Other careers	Librarian; religious brother; travel agent; city planner; cash register technician; secretary; union representative; odd jobs	1 each

The most popular career choice was teaching, with 42 participants naming this as their career choice. All but two had been classroom teachers, but only one had specifically named the role of Math/Science teacher. For many, teaching had been their sole career. One commented: “I have always been a teacher and am still teaching, with plans to retire”.

However, half of those who named teaching as a career also named other careers. Some of these were education related. For example, one participant had worked as a teacher and education administrator, going on to serve as Education Officer at a Canadian Embassy overseas. Another reported:

When I got my B.A. I worked in child care for a couple of years and then pursued a Bachelor of Education. I taught grade 4 & 5 for eight years and then did a pre-Masters in Counselling. I became an elementary counsellor and worked in inner city schools for the rest of my career.

Another participant, who had been an ESL teacher had also worked as a Counselling Psychologist, a Human Resources consultant and a Family Enterprise Advisor, noting: "My career is varied and extremely interesting...and meaningful to me."

The second most reported career choice was with the local, provincial or federal governments or non-government organizations, with 25 participants reporting these careers. Most were in positions of administration, such as policy analyst, auditor, senior development officer and supervisor. Nearly half of these participants named another career, such as Social Worker, along with Senior Policy Analyst for the provincial government and Pharmacist, along with Registrar of the College of Pharmacists in Manitoba, University professor and consultant.

With 24 reports in the area, Health and Medicine was the third most reported career. There were 10 doctors, four of whom also had worked as Medical Academics; 2 dentists; 2 nurses; 2 speech pathologists; pharmacist, nutritionist, dietician, occupational therapist a physiotherapist and a hospital administrator. Fields of medicine included radiology, paediatrics, public health, family practice, psychiatry, dermatology, gastroenterology, and emergency medicine. One of the dentists, who is an orthodontist, also completed a Master of Science degree in neurophysiology and noted, "Philosophy and psychology are my great passions although I am happy doing orthodontics as well."

Both nurses had achieved advanced qualifications and employment; one gaining a Master degree in Community Health and working in a Clinical Nurse Specialist position and the other as a Nurse Manager. One of the speech pathologists had had a career change and was currently working as a human rights lawyer.

A nutritionist noted a mid-career change to adult education, particularly curriculum development. An occupational therapist reported beginning as a practising therapist and culminating as president and CEO of a research organisation.

A 1967 Evaluation of the Major Work program in Winnipeg highlighted the possibility that Major Work had not put enough focus on the arts, music and creative writing (Winnipeg School Division No. 1, 1967). This concern, however, may have been addressed as Arts and Media were reported as careers by 18 participants. Five mentioned work in media, including radio, television, and newspaper, in jobs such as broadcaster, news director, artistic director, digital publisher and music critic. One participant recollected: "After university, journalism, at which I rose to become the first female television news director in Canada at 36 years old." Another said, "I studied classical music at university and became a music critic for national media...and a freelance radio features writer. I am currently [an] artistic director... and doing some freelance writing on music."

Arts careers included singer, actor, musician, artist, writer and actor. In most cases, these people worked in the Arts while also having another career. For example, a participant who had completed a Bachelor of Music and still plays in orchestras and chamber music groups, also had careers in Computing and retail. However, one reported solely an arts career: "In 1975 I entered [an] Acting programme...graduating in 1977. I'm still a professional actor, living and working in London since 1978."

Arts-related careers included architect; director of communication and marketing; public relations; and delivering an arts program to children in hospital.

Law, Finance and Academia were the next most reported careers, with 17 responses each. More than half the lawyers mentioned other careers, such as moving from practicing law to teaching at the university level. One wrote:

After graduating high school, I got a Bachelor of Education and taught school for one year in Winnipeg. I then entered Law School and graduated in 1982...I got involved in politics federally and provincially as a researcher and writer. I then worked with the Manitoba Teachers' Society doing government relations. For the last year and a half, I have been director of communications at Cancer Care.

Those who reported a career in Finance named a variety of roles: Economist, Accountant, Financial Analyst/Consultant, Chartered Accountant, Bank Administrator, Trust Officer. One noted, "I'm a Chartered Accountant, so university undergrad then CA post graduate designation. I am presently the Chief Financial Officer of a private company." Another said, "I was one of the first people involved in creating the marketplace and was one of the few females in the industry. I also got my CA designation."

Major Work teachers consistently encouraged their students to attend university, a memory held by both students and former teachers. One teacher reported that she reminded her class daily that they would attend university following high school. A number of students went on to become university educators, usually following a career in private or public practice.

Of the 17 students who reported an Academic career, 6 worked in the field of Education, 4 in Medicine and Health, 2 in Psychology, and one each in Law, Pharmacy, Statistics, Actuarial Mathematics and Biology. A professor of Psychiatry reported, "I completed medical school and have developed a career as an academic psychiatrist with active roles in medical research, teaching and clinical care. I am currently a Professor of Psychiatry in Canada."

Business and Retail were careers reported by 16 students. They varied from sales, to purchasers, managers, CEOs and business owners in fields varying from fashion to real estate, plumbing, automotive, software and non-government agencies. One participant described being in a variety of retail fields, including sales, fashion, purchasing, manufacturing and project management.

I was able to take on some very exciting projects including the launch of SC in Canada and the establishment of the Community initiative. Sadly, we were so successful in the Community initiative that we rendered ourselves obsolete.

For a number of Major Work classes in Winnipeg, an extra component was learning how to type. At the time, computers were still in the future. Yet some recollected about how that skill assisted them in their computing careers. Twelve participants reported careers in Computing, often as a career change.

I taught Junior High Math and Science...for four years. I then worked as a computer trainer and training department manager... I earned my Master of Continuing Education...I joined my current employer, first as a trainer, then training manager, and now as a project manager. I am responsible for the implementation of my company's computer system for various government agencies.

Besides computer training and management, other jobs in computing included program analyst, software developer, programmer, networking and design, and support. Their journeys to these careers were diverse.

At 16 I quit school and went to work at Richardson's Securities, returning to school at 21, to Red River Community College but quit a Stenography course and got into sales jobs, advancing to store manager, but quit again, returned to school at 30, to Red River CC again, taking Business Accountancy as I was doing the work without the education, then continued into Computer Analyst Programmer course...I liked the programming, and continued on with networking...and then on to...network design.

Writing, oral presentations, tall tales, poetry, Reading Club and genre writing were all covered in the Major Work program. While writing could certainly be included with Arts and media, in this research it is given its own category with 11 participants naming writing as a career choice. Writing jobs included technical writing, editing, digital publishing, copywriter, journalist, advertising consultant, archivist, poet and academic writer. One of the writers shared this story:

I am currently a writer. I came to it the old-fashioned way, not from the academy, although continuing education is very important to me...I was an intellectual explorer and university and other courses and seminars have helped me immensely. I think I'm at 120 of these courses since my B.A. I study what I need to study. It's a writer's privilege I suppose.

Seven participants reported working in Psychology. These included counselling, guidance counselling, employment counsellor, clinical psychologist, behaviour therapist and Psychology professor. One of the psychologists reported:

I began as a Counselling Psychologist with a specialty in Family Therapy, working in different social service agencies...[I] began my career in the private sector as an OD and Training Director. After some years industry, I transferred those skills into the consulting world and have been in private practice for the last 15 years offering OD and Human Resources consulting services to a variety of private, not for profit and government clients.

Both Engineering and Social Work were named as careers by three participants. The engineers reported that they had worked for oil companies or hydro, in positions including risk management consultant, manager and engineering technologist. One said, “I am currently an engineering/management consultant after spending 40 years in the oil industry, including management and executive positions in upstream oil and gas.” Social workers had worked in hospitals, government departments and children’s services.

There were a number of careers named only by a single participant. These included librarian, religious brother, travel agent, city planner, cash register technician, secretary, union representative and odd jobs employee. One participant didn’t name a career but mentioned that she was a grandmother, and another only reported only ‘retired’.

Discussion

While Winnipeg Major Work teachers recalled only subtle directives about emphasising Science and Mathematics in their classes, a discussion with one highlighted her unease about the political situation. Our teacher “was quite concerned for our safety and definitely frightened at the prospect of an atomic bomb attack. The designated hiding spot, under the stairwell, afforded minimal coverage and, of course, would never have prevented serious carnage in the event of a direct hit on the school. Miss M felt very protective of our group, but resisted the urge to express her true feelings in case she caused greater anxiety and distress” (personal correspondence, 2020).

With only minimal focus reported regarding nurturing the sciences, mathematics and leadership, it could be argued that nonetheless, Major Work students took up positions of leadership and many pursued science-related fields.

Of the 170 participants, only three reported choosing the field of engineering and two mathematics: one an actuarial mathematician and the other a mathematics teacher. Science careers were reported by 7 participants and included physics, biology, ecology, geology, scientific research and technology. However, the sciences inform a number of health and medicine-based careers, and these were reported by 24 participants.

The most significant match with overall gifted program aims would be in the area of social leadership. In all career areas, Major Work students reported leadership roles. These included:

- Educational Administrator
- Senior Development Officer
- Supervisor
- Superintendent
- Nurse Manager
- Hospital Administrator
- Artistic Director
- Arts Program Administrator
- Music Critic
- News Director
- Judge
- Bank Administrator
- Financial Advisor
- Equity Investor
- Digital Publisher
- Network Designer
- Editor
- Academic (in various fields)
- Project Management
- Computer Trainer
- Network Designer
- Engineering Management Consultant
- Social Work Manager

With the variety of leadership positions reported, it appears that the goal of developing leaders amongst the gifted and talented students of the Major Work program was certainly addressed. A former student remarked about his class' achievements:

If you were to examine our cohort in detail you would find, without mentioning names and only including what I know:

A provincial court judge, a national maths prize winner, a renowned conciliator who was directly involved in resolving Channel Tunnel labour issues, a scientist who was involved in the development of the Tokamak and fusion research, another who was at CERN, at least two men of the cloth, and a musician who is the talented third generation of a remarkable Winnipeg family – accompanist extraordinaire (personal correspondence).

Referring to the rhyme of our childhood that builds the title of this article, it could read: "Tinker, tailor, soldier, sailor, leader...in all areas of society". In this way, the Winnipeg Major Work program met the social expectations of the time.

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