

Basic Educational Options for Gifted Students in Schools

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Page 1

There is a wide variety of ways that educators can assist in the talent development process of advanced learners. Yet every school needs to have basic provisions in place to assure the educational development of these students in the domains of learning for which the school has responsibility. Most school mission statements proclaim the intention of educating every child to the level of his or her potential, yet many times those words have no translation value for the gifted as they sit bored in classrooms where their instructional level exceeds by years their age-peers sitting in the next seat. Thus there is a real need to consider nonnegotiable options for this population regardless of age or grade considerations as well as general program organizational approaches employed to effect sound service delivery.

Acceleration

One of the most important curriculum policy initiatives that school districts might enact on behalf of all students would be one that addresses acceleration. Acceleration assumes that different students of the same age are at different levels of learning within and across learning areas, thus necessitating diagnosis of learning level and prescription of curriculum at a level slightly above it. The government document *Prisoners of Time* (National Education Commission on Time and Learning, 1994) documented the importance of recognizing time as the crucial variable in learning, an understanding that Bloom had several decades ago: "If experience, research, and common sense teach nothing else, they confirm the truism that people learn at different rates in different ways with different subjects." Understanding that students have differences in learning rates for different subject areas in different kinds of material at different stages of development is crucial to school patterns of curriculum and instruction. Flexibility in schooling, however, has been one of the most difficult tasks for public schools to enact in responding to students with special needs.

Various components need to be considered in developing such a policy at the school district level. One such component should allow for early entrance and early exit procedures for students at various stages of development. Many gifted children are academically ready for school before they are at the "magic age" and others develop more rapidly than age peers, once they are in a schooling environment. Access to high school early eliminates the holding pattern of the middle school years so common in many contexts around the country. Early college entrance can be accomplished by those already academically proficient in high school subject matter. One of the advantages of the new standards movement is a clear way to document mastery levels in each area of schooling, thus allowing students ready to move forward to do so.

Basic Educational Options for Gifted Students in Schools

Joyce VanTassel-Baska, Ed.D.
College of William and Mary

Page 2

Another indication of curriculum flexibility involves the offering of content-based acceleration practices at all levels of schooling and in all subject areas. In the last 20 years, schools have become more open to ideas of math acceleration but not to other subject area advancement. For gifted learners with precocious abilities in verbal, scientific, and artistic areas, such pathways are crucial to enhanced learning and development at their natural rate of progression in school. Not only is there a limit on subject areas to be considered for accelerative practices, there also is often a perception that rate should be capped at six months or a year so as not to allow students to get too out of step with the school curriculum or other students their age. Both of these practices are faulty, based on 80 years of research showing the positive outcomes of such accelerative opportunities on enhanced learning, motivation, and extracurricular engagement of accelerated learners.

Acceptable forms of acceleration in operation at the high school level include the hallmark secondary programs of the College Board Advanced Placement Program (AP) and the International Baccalaureate (IB) Program. Both of these programs offer students the opportunity to engage in college-level work while still in high school and reward their diligence with college placement and/or credit for work done during the high school years. Such a model needs to be available to students at all stages of development, such that evidence of advanced work brings credit toward the next level of the educational experience.

For secondary schools, dual enrollment courses at local community and 4-year colleges would also be important. Many highly able students may wish to sample college early although not actually attend fulltime. Dual enrollment offers a wonderful opportunity for this early academic and socialization process to occur. Students may take 1-2 classes away from campus or sometimes arrangements are made for the dual enrollment course to be delivered on-site. Currently, 22 states have dual enrollment policies, encouraging local districts to take advantage of the opportunity for students to gain access to higher education while still in high school. These courses are then banked for college and will automatically be credited for a student attending a public college in the same state. Often, the equivalent of freshman year in college may be credited. For students and schools in rural areas of a state, dual enrollment provides a strong alternative to AP and IB, often not possible to mount in small schools due to lack of interested faculty or sufficient numbers of ready students.

Another approach to acceleration for students advanced in all areas of the curriculum is simple grade level acceleration. Such acceleration can be handled through early entrance policies but needs to be broadened to consider stages of schooling beyond the naturally occurring transition years. For students showing more than two years

Basic Educational Options for Gifted Students in Schools

Joyce VanTassel-Baska, Ed.D.
College of William and Mary

Page 3

advancement in all school subjects, grade level acceleration may be a good decision. Obviously, each case should be considered individually but more concern is voiced about this well-documented and researched practice than is warranted. Grade acceleration at critical points of schooling can do much to counter boredom and disenchantment with school among our best learners.

A final avenue for acceleration should be in the realm of telecommunications. Advanced courses can now be provided technologically in ways not possible a decade ago. School policy needs to reflect these new alternatives to teaching and learning, especially for advanced students who can profit greatly from them. Several universities offer on-line courses, many tailored to younger students such as the Stanford Education Program for Gifted Youth (EPGY) computer-based program in mathematics. Other universities such as Ball State beam advanced courses to rural Indiana schools through their telecommunications link. Independent study opportunities with university faculty and research project work conducted globally can now be a part of student learning beyond the classroom.

Grouping

Given the current research on the positive use of ability grouping with the gifted (Kulik & Kulik, 1992; Rogers, 1998), it is critical that school districts attend to this facet of a support structure in evolving programs. The range of alternatives extends from within-class flexible grouping and differentiated assignments to opportunities for special classes or schools and independent grouping options such as mentorships and internships.

The use of within class grouping is critical at all levels of schooling. At the elementary level, many classrooms now are heterogeneous and inclusive. Such settings typically provide little differentiation or challenge for the gifted learner and may not be as beneficial for any group as within-class grouping approaches. At the secondary levels, the norm for honors and even advanced placement grouping is across high ability and gifted ranges. Consequently, the pace of the class and the opportunity for more in-depth work may be lost to gifted students as the teacher struggles to cover all of the material with everyone. In-class grouping according to student capacity provides teachers alternative ways to handle certain aspects of learning. For example, differentiating paper assignments by group allows advanced students both more latitude and depth potential for their work. Differentiating readings by group may have the same effect. More in-class writing practice may be given to groups already skilled at peer critique. All of these approaches to vary "within group" work will help the teacher ensure that each student receives appropriate levels of instruction.

Basic Educational Options for Gifted Students in Schools

Joyce VanTassel-Baska, Ed.D.
College of William and Mary

Page 4

Special class grouping of gifted learners by subject area has historically been the most utilized approach to grouping at the secondary level while pull-out by program focus has predominated at the elementary level. Special class grouping is one of the primary ways to deliver differentiated curriculum. Without such grouping arrangements, it is much more difficult to do so. Research has shown that 84% of time in heterogeneous classroom settings is spent on whole class activities, with no attention to differentiating for the gifted (Archambault, Westberg, K. L., Brown, Hallmark, Zhang, & Emmons, 1993). Moreover, special classes are the context within which good acceleration practices for individual students can be applied, as the level of the class by necessity needs to be more advanced in content. Many schools have provided special grouping for mathematics and language arts, but not science and social studies. Again, it is critical that a grouping policy apply to all relevant academic subjects, where size of school can allow for such clustering to be formed. Students advanced in all areas need the opportunity to interact with others at their ability levels and to advance academically at a rate and pace consonant with their abilities. Such a situation can typically only occur in a specialized group setting.

Grouping for more independent types of work is also a critical part of a grouping policy at all levels. Students may select among options geared at providing them more personalized opportunities for intellectual growth, whether through a well-designed independent project or through work in a professional setting or through an "optimal match" with an adult in an area of expertise in which the student is interested. Each of these types of arrangements calls for schools to adopt a policy that allows for one-on-one interactions with the community at large as well as more individualized use of school time.

Differentiated curriculum

Differentiation for the gifted recognizes the interrelated importance of curriculum, instruction, and assessment in defining the term. A differentiated curriculum is one that is tailored to the needs of groups of gifted learners and/or individual students and provides experiences sufficiently different from the norm to justify specialized intervention, delivered by a trained educator of the gifted using appropriate instructional and assessment processes to optimize learning.

Curriculum design is one major component of a differentiated curriculum for the gifted since it delineates key features that constitute any worthwhile curriculum. A well-constructed curriculum for the gifted has to identify appropriate goals and outcomes. What is important for these students to know and be able to do at what stages of development? How do planned learning experiences focus on meaningful experiences

Basic Educational Options for Gifted Students in Schools

Joyce VanTassel-Baska, Ed.D.
College of William and Mary

Page 5

that provides depth and complexity at a pace that honors the gifted learner's rate of advancement through material? The curriculum for the gifted must also be exemplary for the subject matter under study, meaning that it should be standards-based and thus current in the thinking of real world professionals who practice writing, mathematical problem-solving or do science for a living. Moreover, it should be designed to honor high ability student needs for advanced challenge, in-depth thinking and doing, and abstract conceptualization.

The new standards require more attention to helping educators develop advanced tasks that address the standards, organize the standards across grade levels to ensure an emphasis on higher level skills and concepts, and provide opportunities for depth of exploration of concepts across sets of standards. Of less help is creating whole new courses or units that are outside the intent of the standards.

Curriculum differentiation must also address the need for careful selection of materials for use in classrooms serving gifted and high ability learners. These materials should go beyond a single text as resource, provide advanced readings, present interesting and challenging ideas, treat knowledge as tentative and open-ended, and provide a conceptual depth that allows students to make interdisciplinary connections. Hopefully, each classroom would also have high quality technology resources that would meet the same criteria.

Instructional approaches that foster differentiated responses among diverse learners include those that are inquiry-based, open-ended, and employ flexible grouping practices. An example of an effective inquiry-based model would be problem-based learning (PBL) that has the learner encounter a real world problem sculpted by the teacher out of key learnings to be acquired in a given subject, proceed to inquire about the nature of the problem as well as effective avenues to research about it, and sources for acquiring relevant data. The instructional techniques needed by the teacher include high level questioning skills, listening skills, conferencing skills, and tutorial abilities in order to guide the process to successful learning closure in a classroom. PBL also requires the use of flexible team grouping and whole class discussion. Problem resolution requires student-initiated projects and presentations, guided by the teacher. Thus effective instruction must include the selection of a few core teaching models that successfully highlight the intended outcomes of the curriculum. Administrators must ensure that teachers have the opportunity to learn such models deeply and well.

Just as differentiation involves careful selection of core materials and curriculum that underlies them and the deliberate choice of high powered instructional approaches, it also requires the choice of differentiated assessment protocols that reflect the high level

Basic Educational Options for Gifted Students in Schools

Joyce VanTassel-Baska, Ed.D.
College of William and Mary

Page 6

learning attained. High stakes assessments such as the Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT), Advanced Placement exams, and even state assessments are the standardized symbols of how well students are doing in comparison to others of their age. Secondary schools, in order to be considered high quality, must be producing students scoring at the top levels on these nationally normed instruments. Yet deep preparation for success on these tests rests in individual classrooms. Even strong learners like the gifted cannot do as well as they could without adequate preparation in relevant content-based curriculum archetypes. Thus the use of these assessments as planning tools for direct instruction in each relevant subject area is a key to overall improvement in student performance. Administrators responsible for the review of teacher lesson plans need to know how such assessment models are being converted into work in classrooms. Departments need to spend planning time on strategies for incorporating such elements. Since such assessments are a reality and viewed by our society as crucial indicators of student progress in school, we need to make them work for us rather than against us in the public arena.

In addition to standardized measures being employed to assess student learning, it is also crucial that more performance-based tools be employed to assess individual growth and development. In tandem with more standardized measures, they provide a more complete picture of individual progress toward specific education goals. For gifted learners, in particular, the quality of performance on such measures may be a better indicator of skills and concepts deeply mastered than paper and pencil measures.

A final consideration in the use of alternative assessment approaches with gifted learners involves attention to teaching students the rubrics for assessment at the time the assignment is given so that students can understand expectation levels required for any given assignment at conception rather than at the end. This approach also ensures that criteria for judgment are both well-defined by the teacher and well-understood by the student.

Quality teachers

Core knowledge and skills for teachers who work with the gifted might be a long list indeed, but focusing it on nonnegotiables may make it more manageable. What are the critical requirements for identifying high quality teachers of the gifted? First of all, teachers of the gifted need to be lifelong learners themselves, open to new experiences and able to appreciate the value of new learning and how it applies to the classroom. Secondly, they need to be passionate about at least one area of knowledge that they know well and be able to communicate that passion and its underlying expertise to students. This would imply deep knowledge in a subject area coupled with the ability to use the skills associated with that knowledge domain at a high level. Thirdly, they need to be

Basic Educational Options for Gifted Students in Schools

Joyce VanTassel-Baska, Ed.D.
College of William and Mary

Page 7

good thinkers, able to manipulate ideas at analysis, synthesis, and evaluation levels with their students within and across areas of knowledge. Such facility would imply that they themselves were strong students in college and scored well on tests of reasoning like the Scholastic Aptitude Test and the Graduate Record Exam. Fourth, teachers of the gifted must be capable of processing information in a simultaneity mode, meaning that they need to be able to address multiple objectives at the same time, recognize how students might manipulate different higher level skills in the same task demand, and easily align lower level tasks within those that require higher level skills and concepts.

Teacher-directed differentiation for the gifted has no meaning if teachers cannot perform these types of tasks and evidence these skills. In order to develop and demonstrate these skills, teachers of the gifted need a master's degree and two years of teaching in regular classrooms. Furthermore, sustained coherent inservice programs are important in maintaining and expanding teacher expertise.

Access to advanced opportunities external to schools

While local schools play a critical role in educating students, they can be even more effective when coupled with outside community resources that supplement learning. One such program model is the Saturday and/or Summer Enrichment programs offered by local universities. These programs tend to be enrichment oriented and allow area gifted students to use their leisure time pursuing topics of academic interest such as poetry, computers, chemistry, and architecture under the direction of a highly qualified instructor. Because these programs usually charge tuition, it is often necessary for schools to disseminate information to parents in order to make them aware of such services. Also offered by universities are the Talent Search programs, usually targeted to academically able middle school students who qualify based on SAT scores. Often offered during the summer, including a residential component, many of these programs provide accelerated content equivalent to high school course-work.

Other activities which involve the community include mentorships and internships. The former involves selecting an individual who can serve as a role model to a student, and establishing a one-on-one relationship. This connection helps a student understand how an adult mentor experiences and processes the world, with the relationship built on some area of mutual interest. Internships and/or job shadowing opportunities involve placements in community settings, usually for a period from two weeks to a full term, depending on the situation. The purpose is to help the student explore the real world and to see the work habits and task demands that accompany certain professions. Both of these alternatives are highly relevant for gifted students, particularly for the extremely gifted child or adolescent who may feel "very different"

Basic Educational Options for Gifted Students in Schools

Joyce VanTassel-Baska, Ed.D.
College of William and Mary

Page 8

from the norm and may have time available to explore different work environments or career options as a result of program or content acceleration.

Conclusion

All of these nonnegotiable options are crucial to the development of talent but rarely can be done by the schools alone. An active partnership with families is required to ensure that students receive the right opportunities at the right time in the right degree of intensity. There are no magic rules to assist in this process as it is highly individualized and dependent on the domain of talent, the level of student aptitude and interest, and the developmental stage of the talent itself. Consequently, it is crucial that educators are sensitive to the parental perspective as each of these options is activated. Public and private education are a necessary but not sufficient catalyst for talent to thrive.

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