

MEETING THE NEEDS OF THE

GIFTED AND TALENTED

BY ELLEN CLIZBE

The new school year is about to begin. In a few moments the bell will ring, and students will enter your classroom. They are filled with anticipation, excitement, ambivalence, perhaps even a little anxiety. They are hopeful about their personal and academic goals. Will you help them fulfill these goals?

Your classes probably consist mainly of average students, with some who are above average, a few high achievers, and a few underachievers. How do you focus the general lesson plan? To meet the needs of the majority, with some special activities to help the underachievers gain success? But what about the high achievers? These students learn rapidly and earn high grades without special attention. But I wonder—do those high grades mean that they are meeting their potential? Are they challenged? . . . stretching their capacities? . . . forming effective methods of inquiry? How can teachers enhance the educational

process of students who are categorized as gifted and talented?

The term gifted and talented children means children and whenever applicable, youth, who are identified at the preschool, elementary, or secondary level as possessing demonstrated or potential abilities that give evidence of high performance in capability in areas such as

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intellectual, creative, specific academic, or leadership ability, or in the performing and visual arts, and who by reason thereof, require services or activities not ordinarily provided by the school.¹

The shining light of public awareness was first directed on students labeled gifted and talented after the Marland Report of 1971. It “galvanized a small and committed group of educators, parents, and advocates around a remarkable premise: That these students deserved ‘differentiated educational programming’ no less than students with disabilities.”²

Because of their outstanding ability, more than two million school-age children in the United States are considered gifted and talented. Once stereotyped as physically weak and mentally unbalanced, these children are now generally viewed as healthy and well-adjusted.

Every student who earns high grades is not necessarily gifted. Identification should not be based on IQ alone, but should use a multidimensional approach that employs achievement and aptitude tests, behavioral checklists, tests of creative abilities, anecdotal records, work samples, interviews, leadership and grades.³ If we assess students in this

way, we will be more likely to identify potential giftedness.

Characteristics

Through research, a profile has emerged of the gifted and talented student's behavioral traits. The following lists many of them:

1. *Curious*: keen observer; alert, inquisitive nature; questions the how and why of things; eager, pursues many interests in depth.

2. *Rapid Learner*: quickly masters facts; retains and applies information; needs minimal instruction on routine tasks.

3. *Sustains Involvement*: demonstrates persistent goal-directed behavior; has long attention span; ignores distractions, not easily discouraged by setbacks; self-motivated.

4. *Socially Aware*: sensitive and intuitive; empathizes with others; flexible and open in manner; concerned with values and ideals.

5. *Enjoys Reading*: reads a wide range of materials for information and pleasure, including advanced selections; uses reference works effectively at an early age.

6. *Verbally Proficient*: possesses an advanced vocabulary; expresses himself or herself fluently; communicates precisely and accurately; expresses his or her own opinions freely; shows humor; asks probing questions.

7. *Responsible*: works independently; needs minimal directions; understands and accepts guidelines; organizes tasks, peers, and events; often serves as a leader; respected by peers.

8. *Critical Thinker*: analyzes and is logical; reasons out complicated things; evaluates situations; uses common sense; expresses and accepts constructive criticism.

9. *Creative*: imaginative, versatile, and adaptable; flexible in ideas and actions; possesses problem-solving ability; original and inventive; gives clever and witty responses.

10. *Generalizes*: perceives and ab-

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stracts ideas; sees relationships; grasps underlying principles; makes valid assumptions about people, events, and things; integrates areas of knowledge; is not will-

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ing to accept superficial statements, responses, or evaluations.

11. *Special Ability*: possesses unusual interest and aptitude in an academic area; has exceptional mechanical ability; demonstrates talent or potential in one of the performing arts; sensitive to aesthetic quality and to the intrinsic beauty of things.

12. *Resourceful*: a producer who has a knack for using the limited resources, time, and people in a learning environment to achieve outstanding results; a prolific and creative author; his or her study and research results in original projects; generates new ideas and viewpoints; proposes novel solutions to peer conflict, sees relationships among seemingly diverse ideas.

13. *Critical*: is critical of self and others.⁴

Gifted students are usually more popular and have better social skills than young people at other intellectual ability levels.⁵ However, they have distinctive problems. Since peers often place little value on intellectual giftedness, this talent may be minimized in comparisons with other outstanding students, such as star athletes. When grading is done on the curve and the gifted student skews the curve, causing classmates to receive lower grades, he or she is not appreciated. The following quotes highlight some of the problems faced

by gifted students:

... [I]nner-city students [see] the mathematically talented students as show-offs. . . As a result of peer pressure and perhaps even teacher pressure, many gifted students become withdrawn or rebellious in the classroom. Gifted students may demonstrate serious negative classroom behaviors, including antisocial acting out to achieve recognition, intentional failure to gain attention or to mask ability.⁶

Some teachers dislike having the gifted in their classes. Because of perceiving the world in ways different from most of us, many of the responses of these thinkers seem strange or even wrong to many teachers. . . . A divergent thinker will often arrive at apparently erroneous answers but, when asked to explain these answers, will sometimes demonstrate that the wrong answer is actually right when viewed from a different perspective.⁷

Teachers whose classes contain gifted and talented learners might perhaps perceive the problem as how to deactivate rather than activate these students. Once a gifted indi-

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*vidual becomes involved in a particular area, interest and singular pursuit of knowledge in that area are often long lived.*⁸

Teaching Strategies

To meet the needs of the gifted, the curriculum must be qualitatively different from the basic coursework for other students.

Often enrichment translates into merely increasing the quantity of work that gifted students must do. This does not produce a better quality of learning unless a challenge is added, such as using “a different perspective or trying to complete new problems without any mistakes.”⁹

One way to enhance learning for gifted students is to customize the curriculum to meet their special talents in the areas of drama, science, music, and other areas of interest.

The following principles offer worthwhile ideas and methods of enhancing creative growth at the elementary and secondary levels:

1. “Develop a creative classroom atmosphere.”¹⁰

2. Teach learners to understand the topic of creativity in general, and the process of creative problem-solving, in particular.¹¹

3. Teach the same creative thinking techniques used deliberately and successfully by creative adults.

a. Brainstorming.

b. Attribute learning: Includes modifying attributes of a product or process, or else transferring an attribute from one situation to another.

c. Morphological synthesis: Use a matrix to produce new idea combinations. (Five potato dishes combined with five kinds of meat and five vegetables produce 125 dinner combinations.)

d. Idea checklists: Modify, magnify, minimize, substitute, rearrange, reverse, etc.

These suggest—almost involuntarily—innovative new idea combinations.¹²

e. Direct analogy.

f. Personal analogy: Finding new viewpoints by becoming part of the problem.

g. Fantasy analogy: Using one’s wildest imagination to help stimulate creative solutions. (E.g., How can we make a new community swimming pool build and pay for itself?)¹³

4. Involve students in activities that require creative thinking.¹⁴

How can you motivate the gifted while still giving full attention to others? Alane Starko bases her plan on three questions:

1. *What does the student already know?*

There is more to this question than not wasting the student’s time. Students who get easy A’s for years can fall apart when they finally face material that really challenges their abilities. Suddenly they discover they have neither the emotional resilience or the study habits to succeed.

2. *What parts of the regular curriculum does the student need to learn?* Advancement should not leave any large gaps in the child’s education.

3. *How can I adjust the regular curriculum for my gifted students?* What activities should be added? Remember,

as these students learn new things, they develop abilities in creative, productive, and stimulating ways.¹⁵

Techniques used to gear instruction to the gifted student include:

• Developing an atmosphere that fosters creativity,

• Teaching steps for creative problem solving,

• Exploring strategies to help students produce a project to present to an audience.¹⁶

Another strategy uses independent study:

• Renzulli’s Enrichment Triad has as a primary goal the development of one’s ability to research and solve real problems.

• Self-Directed Learning focuses on increasing independent learning skills.

• Individualized Educational Plans (IEPs) fit the curriculum to the specific strengths and deficiencies of each student.

• Computer Aided Gifted Programming offers challenges for students with special interests and aptitudes in math.¹⁷

• Computer Assisted Instruction (CAI) allows gifted learners to progress at their own pace. Application software such as word processing, data base management, spreadsheet programs, graphics packages, and communication programs

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give students new tools with which to analyze, synthesize, and evaluate information.¹⁸

Organizational Options

There are several different ways to adapt the curriculum to accommodate the gifted and talented. According to Eby and Smutny, they need three types of curricula:

1. The gifted need accelerated curricula that allow them to move at a rapid pace through a subject or field of study.

2. They need enriched curricula made

up of learning experiences with greater depth and/or breadth than their classmates want or need.

3. They require individualized curricula that emphasize independent study on self-selected topics or interest areas.¹⁹

In a pull-out program or an enrichment plan, gifted students receive most of their instruction in the regular classroom but are “pulled out” to study with other gifted children in a special class for a portion of the school day or week.²⁰

Gearheart, Weishahn, and Gearheart list three major administrative and organizational approaches: ability grouping, acceleration, and enrichment.

1. *Ability Grouping*

- a. regular classroom with cluster.
- b. regular classroom with pullout.
- c. individualized classrooms (all students are involved in individual, team, and flexible, small-group instruction).
- d. special class with some integrated classes.
- e. special class—gifted students are in a separate special class and have little or no involvement with other students.
- f. special schools.

2. *Acceleration*—any process that leads to the student’s more rapid movement through the regular program.

Identification of the gifted should not be based on IQ alone, but should use a multidimensional approach.

3. *Enrichment*—the addition of disciplines or areas of learning not normally found in the regular curriculum.²¹

Stanley argues that most enrichment activities are given overly glamorous titles and are potentially dangerous if not accompanied by acceleration in subject matter and/or grade.²²

Richardson and Benbow report that educational acceleration exerts no ill effects on social and emotional adjustment, at least among mathematically precocious youth, and it may even enhance peer-group relations among gifted female students.²³

There are several types of acceleration: grade skipping, subject skipping, and credit by examination.²⁴ In secondary

schools, there are two main types of programs. These are the advanced placement (APO) program sponsored by the College Entrance Examination Board (CEEB), and actual college or university classes. These can be offered only if the school is near a college and if the college cooperates.²⁵ The students may attend classes at the college, or a professor may teach the class at the high school.

Magnet schools offer programs tailored to meet the educational needs of the gifted, including those talented in the arts, gifted in academics, interested in business, or aspiring toward a law career.²⁶ Because of their small size and geographical separation, this is not usually an option in the Adventist school system.

Another option is a mentor program. The student visits the mentor at the job site on a scheduled basis to learn firsthand the activities, responsibilities, problems, and life-style associated with the particular business or profession.²⁷

Summary

Gifted and talented students have feelings, concerns, and interests like other young people. They enjoy friends, fun, music, and other things most young people enjoy. But the gifted are endowed with

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special talents in the areas of intellect, creativity, leadership, performing or visual arts.

We must treat gifted students as respectfully and caringly as any other student, and design a differentiated curriculum to match their specific areas of giftedness. Whether their abilities are accommodated through ability groups, acceleration, enrichment, or a combination of these approaches, we must ensure that they get the core curriculum, with no gaps in their education.

If we do that, when spring arrives and our classes are ready to move on, we can feel satisfied that the needs of all our students—the average, above average, below average, and the gifted—have been met. ☞

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