Challenges and Possibilities for Serving Gifted Learners in the Regular Classroom

This article addresses the major obstacles that impede educators in differentiating for gifted learners in the regular classroom. Specific discussion of the lack of subject matter knowledge, the lack of classroom management skills, teachers’ attitudes and beliefs about learning, lack of knowledge for modifying the curriculum, issues regarding responding to diverse populations, difficulties of effective use and location of resources, lack of planning time, lack of administrative support, and lack of relevant pedagogical skills is provided. Strategies for recognizing and overcoming the obstacles are embedded within the discussion of each. Finally, important general considerations for facilitating the use of differentiation in classrooms are discussed, including the use of diagnostic-prescriptive learning, modulating teaching and learning expectations, and flexibility of curriculum and teacher beliefs surrounding student learning.

The landscape of education is changing, and educators in the regular classroom are expected to meet the varied needs of diverse learners with higher degrees of accountability. Many educators acknowledge that students arrive in their heterogeneous classroom with differing levels of development, interests, and exposure to a plethora of environments and experiences. The increasing diversity of the student population, coupled with new accountability systems, exacerbates the many barriers for providing appropriate instruction, especially for gifted students. This article discusses the most common barriers educators face when providing challenges for gifted learners, and suggests strategies and solutions for minimizing those barriers to promote talent development and utilize effective instructional strategies for gifted students in the regular classroom.
Challenges to Serving Gifted Learners

In the current state of education, gifted students and other special populations may be sorely neglected unless all teachers are aware of their needs and have the skills to plan for them effectively. Differentiation of curriculum for gifted learning is a critical aspect of such planning. Yet there are very real reasons that there are limited successes in getting classroom teachers to differentiate for this population. Studies consistently report that little differentiation is occurring for gifted learners in regular classrooms, a pattern that remains virtually unchanged in the past 10 years, despite efforts in professional development (Westberg, Archambault, Dobyns, & Slavin, 1993; Westberg & Daoust, 2004). Educators must become aware of the challenges in differentiating effectively for gifted learners to overcome them.

Several major barriers to differentiating for gifted learners are discussed. Each of these barriers, although listed as specific to gifted learners, may also apply to other special populations for which educators are responsible for curriculum modifications. Yet differentiation for the gifted learner may still prove to be more challenging due to the factors of the (a) degree of differentiation required, (b) need to provide advanced learning opportunities beyond grade level, (c) philosophical barriers and antipathy of many teachers toward the gifted learner and their needs, (d) lack of understood services for the gifted population, and (e) lack of service mandates in many states to support services for gifted learners leading to greater neglect.

Without overcoming these barriers and finding adequate ways to meet the needs of gifted students, many gifted students who score in the top quintile on standardized tests regress toward normal levels of achievement (Sanders & Horn, 1998; Stambaugh, 2001).

Lack of Sufficient Subject Matter Knowledge

Subject matter knowledge, although important for all students, becomes critical for educators working with gifted students. Gifted students are more precocious in subject matter content and need educators who possess advanced understanding to accelerate students beyond the typical curriculum content areas. Lack of content knowledge also affects the use of important pedagogy as well. If elementary teachers do not know the scientific process, for example, it is very difficult to guide gifted students through independent inquiry or ask probing questions of student groups.

Many states are moving toward requirements in teacher licensure that include specialization in specific content areas, not only for high school and middle school teachers, but elementary educators as well. Those teachers who are not as familiar with specific subject matter disciplines may choose to partner with content specialists in the school district, seek outside content mentors for students, or expand their knowledge base through professional development in a particular field.

Limited Classroom Management Skills

Informal surveys from consultants who conduct workshops on differentiation report that classroom management is the most common concern that arises when educators attempt differentiation, and is one of the main reasons they quit within a few attempts. Staff development on differentiation for gifted learners must include training in classroom management skills (Tomlinson & Allan, 2000). Educators must be comfortable allowing students the opportunities to work on different assignments, tasks, and levels of content throughout the course of a unit or lesson. Such differentiation often requires mobility in the room, use of learning centers, and careful record keeping of individual and group progress. Lack of strong skills in this area defeat the possibilities of successful differentiation.

Successful educators who differentiate find innovative ways to manage the classroom that fit their teaching style and are conducive to facilitating the varied levels of student production and learning. Successful strategies include the use of color coding assignments, pre-assessing and grouping, starting small in attempts to differentiate, educating parents and students on why students may be doing different assignments at different times, and providing alternate and mean-
ingful activities through independent study options for students based on the varied pacing adjustments necessary (Tomlinson, 1999).

**Attitudes and Beliefs About Learning**

There are specific beliefs that educators must embrace if they are to be successful in differentiating for gifted learners (Blair, 2000). First is the belief that students learn at different rates, possess different abilities and interests, and acquire knowledge through different avenues. Without this basic assumption about student learning, educators may not see the need to differentiate. A second belief is that the teacher is not the keeper of all knowledge. Instead, students can acquire information through independent study or homogeneous group work, for example, although teacher feedback and direct instruction is still a necessary ingredient for gifted students to progress. Sometimes the role of the teacher is to build capacity and facilitate learning by providing opportunities for students to pursue their interests or by accelerating the content to allow students opportunities to stretch and grow, instead of regress or maintain the status quo. However, many educators believe that if gifted students do not stay with the rest of the class, they will not pass the required state assessments. This is typically an argument of convenience for the educator or fear within the accountability system.

Educators who acknowledge the varied needs of learners will be more likely to address those needs and differentiate accordingly. This includes pre-assessment of learning and tailored activities based on pre-assessment, adjusting the pace of learning, adjusting the level of complexity of different tasks, and the inclusion of varied instructional strategies. Studies suggest that gifted students do not score significantly lower on standardized tests if excused from instruction based on the use of pre-assessment approaches to compact the curriculum (Reis, Westberg, Kulikowich, & Purcell, 1998).

**Appropriate Modification of the Curriculum**

Many educators are out of their comfort zone when asked to modify curriculum; it requires additional work and the creation of multiple lesson plans. Policies and high stakes assessment add to the difficulty, because many educators fear that gifted students may not pass state assessments if their curriculum is modified (Reis et al., 1998). Tailoring a curriculum also requires a working knowledge of the standards at levels below and above one’s teaching level (VanTassel-Baska & Little, 2003), frequently not a knowledge base that teachers have, especially at the elementary level. Adjusting for the varied needs of learners can be a daunting task, especially if a strong belief system in how students learn, classroom management skills, and content knowledge are not central to educational practice.

Curriculum modification, essential for gifted student growth, may occur in a number of ways, depending on student needs and interests. Acceleration of content, the addition of depth and complexity through required tasks, the use of creative tasks, and the examination of major concepts or themes that cut across disciplines are all key components of curriculum modification (VanTassel-Baska & Little, 2003). Educators can accelerate the curriculum through the substitution of more difficult texts or the incorporation of real world content. Depth and complexity can be added by teaching advanced graphic organizers and models for thinking, reasoning, problem solving, or analyzing literature (VanTassel-Baska & Little, 2003). A creative component can be added through the requirement of projects that incorporate advanced learning with the synthesizing of information and a new resultant creation. Students also may be challenged by connecting major generalizations about concepts such as conflict, change, cause and effect, or patterns across disciplines.

**Responding to Diverse Populations**

The issue of differentiating for the gifted learner is further exacerbated by confronting students who are twice (or thrice) exceptional, minority, or of low socioeconomic (SES) status. First, the twice-exceptional learner is both gifted and suffers from specific learning problems, requiring further modification in their curriculum (VanTassel-Baska & Baska, 2004). Because such
students are often not covered under special education law, teachers must be ingenious in responding effectively to their needs in regular classroom settings. Constructing a curriculum that is sufficiently challenging, with learning strategies essential to its translation, many times is a barrier for teachers. Employment of key learning approaches such as nonstandardized tests, extended deadlines for assignments, alternative modalities for execution of tasks such as the computer over handwritten work, and altering choice in assignments can go a long way in overcoming such barriers.

Minority students and low SES gifted students also create confounding issues for differentiating the curriculum. Often these students underachieve based on cultural norms or placing group needs before their own (Ford, 1996). Many students in this group also suffer from peer rejection if they excel in school, making them more likely to underachieve if educators do not recognize their unique talents. Home and family members also play significant roles in the lives of low SES students, many times promoting low expectations or emphases on life and survival issues instead of education. A lack of experience and environmental stimulation may also hamper school achievement (VanTassel-Baska, 2003).

Research in the field suggests that the curriculum must be modified in different ways. For example, many disadvantaged students need opportunities for creative product design and connections that include psychomotor activity (VanTassel-Baska, 2003) and the arts (Ford & Harris, 1995). Other opportunities for instruction include management strategies such as grouping students with like intellectual and developmental peers, the use of technological connections within the curriculum, mentorships or internships, and a strong emphasis on scaffolding that bridges thinking to higher levels of thought and challenging content (VanTassel-Baska, 2003).

**Difficulty Finding and Utilizing Resources**

Educators must seek sources beyond the prescribed curriculum to provide accelerated and enriched content experiences for gifted learners. Resources may include higher level readings, curriculum at an advanced grade level, or community personnel willing to serve as content mentors for a given period. Educators of students at the primary grades may also struggle with finding appropriate resources that are at a higher level but discuss issues that are age-appropriate. Once the resources are found, educators may need to find time to assist students with the utilization of those resources. Many times educators believe that gifted students have the necessary skills to utilize appropriate resources, can learn independently once resources are provided, or do not need outside interventions. Such beliefs are frequently erroneous.

Educators must provide scaffolding, instruction, and feedback for gifted students using appropriate resources. Although gifted students should be taught to work independently, if they rarely need teacher contact to complete assignments, educators may need to re-examine the difficulty of the assignment, as more depth and complexity or more difficult resources may need to be considered.

**Lack of Planning Time**

In differentiating instruction, educators need time to adjust the curriculum, find the needed resources, and cooperatively work with vertical and horizontal teams of educators. Currently, most planning time for teachers is eaten up in team meetings or other group sessions where instructional planning is not the centerpiece for discussion (DuFour & Eaker, 1998). It is also not enough to have planning time individually when working with gifted students. Educators need to discuss learning options with colleagues at grade levels higher than what they teach, to coordinate learning and appropriately accelerate the content.

Ideally, horizontal team discussions are necessary, especially if the school system does not group students in gifted clusters or by ability. Educators of the same grade level may be able to minimize preparation time and share the load of differentiating by flexibly grouping students and trading groups based on specific content areas. Without sufficient planning time, educators may
feel frustrated and overwhelmed by the idea of meeting the needs of gifted learners. To differentiate effectively, daily and weekly planning segments are necessary.

**Lack of Administrative Support for Differentiating Practices**

Leadership support is essential for meeting the needs of gifted students in the regular classroom (Tomlinson & Allan, 2000; VanTassel-Baska & Little, 2003). This means that the educational leadership of a district or building must support long-term learning (growth over time), as much as short-term achievement (a snapshot in time of what the child knows). Vocal support is not enough to encourage teachers to differentiate. Although teachers can support gifted learners on their own, systemic change occurs only when leaders proactively support differentiating practices.

Leaders need to provide ongoing support within the school district or building that encourages teachers to utilize differentiated strategies for gifted learners. A system must be in place to assist with that support, including administrative visits to classrooms, questions about how teachers are meeting the needs of gifted learners, provision of needed resources, staff development provisions and common planning times, as well as an accountability measure for meeting the needs of gifted learners. Teachers must see that administrators care about the growth and development of gifted learners as much as they care about other learners. The need for a supportive school climate that fosters high expectations for teachers and holds them accountable for differentiation is essential to the process being successful.

**Lack of Relevant Pedagogical Skills**

Few preservice and practicing educators have had the training and support necessary to work with gifted students (Westberg et al., 1993; Westberg & Daoust, 2004). The construction of higher level questions, promotion of reasoning and critical thinking, pre-assessment and diagnostic learning, problem-based learning, and interdisciplinary connections are typically not utilized to the extent necessary for gifted students to progress.

Studies indicate that there is significant growth in gifted student achievement when educators use advanced, content-relevant pedagogical models and strategies (VanTassel-Baska, Bass, Reis, Poland, & Avery, 1998; VanTassel-Baska, Zuo, Avery, & Little, 2002). Therefore, educators need ongoing training and modeling of the relevant pedagogical skills in their specific discipline(s), including when and how to apply the various strategies as part of their repertoire.

**Possibilities for Serving Gifted Learners**

Growth, change, and advanced levels of gifted student achievement can only occur when educators and leaders acknowledge the barriers and take the necessary steps toward minimizing them. Specific strategies educators can attempt and leaders can suggest for serving gifted learners in the regular classroom are as follows.

**Diagnostic-Prescriptive Assessment**

Diagnostic-prescriptive assessment was developed in the 1970s by Julian Stanley, and has been used in programs for the gifted ever since (Benbow & Stanley, 1983). This strategy is highly effective and involves pre-assessing students, grouping them based on need, and providing effective curricular adjustments. For example, at the beginning of the school year, educators may administer the end-of-the-year assessment for their specific content discipline in each of the content areas. The assessments can be the textbook-made cumulative reviews, selected problems from each textbook chapter, formal reading comprehension assessments and running record scores, or teacher-made assessments. In each of the content areas, students who score an 85% or higher will need compressed instruction that is substituted with more advanced work in the particular areas. Although some educators would suggest that an 85% is a grade of B, because the assessments are given prior to instruction the score actually suggests that students know at least 85% of the con-
tent, prior to instruction. Substitution of the curriculum is necessary for continued growth. Once the need for advanced curriculum is documented, those students who score at or above the 85% mark should be grouped together for instruction in the relevant content areas. Some students may be above even the gifted group. If that is the case, there is a need to place them with the closest intellectual peer. It is important to have students working together, as well as independently, to support advanced learning and social-emotional issues (Rogers, 2002).

Grouping students in the same classroom at each grade level for specific content is not only beneficial to the child, but makes it easier for the teacher to manage the differentiated learning. Once students are grouped, educators must plan advanced curricular options for the relevant content areas, especially reading and math. These substitutions include curriculum written specifically for gifted learners, advanced grade level texts or readings, interdisciplinary projects, real-world investigations, and advanced organizers that scaffold reasoning and promote thinking skills.

Modulating Expectations

Educators may also modulate the expectations they have for gifted students. Some educators misconstrue the idea of higher expectations to mean more work for the gifted child or unreasonable expectations with the punishment of a low grade. Caution must be taken regarding this issue, or gifted students will underachieve if they feel they are being punished for being gifted. However, in moderation, raising the expectation for gifted students can be successful. Educators can provide rubrics that explain advanced levels of achievement that are beyond the grade level so gifted students have a framework and model from which to work and expand. Expectations can also be raised based on the questions or products required of gifted students. For example, gifted students may be asked to make interdisciplinary connections or relate products to real-world events and personal data collection, instead of simply reporting from other's work.

Flexibility

Flexibility relates specifically to the classroom philosophy and the operationalization of beliefs of educators about learning and gifted students in general. Educators must acknowledge that gifted students need different instructional strategies, resources, and curricular modifications. Flexibility relates not only to the educator’s philosophy that disregards a one-size-fits-all curriculum, but also the curriculum approaches inherent to the cultivation of advanced learning. Flexibility is manifest based on the content students are learning, the processes or pedagogical strategies utilized, the conceptual frameworks that add depth to thinking, and the products gifted students complete to illustrate their learning (Tomlinson, 1999; VanTassel-Baska & Little, 2003).

Educators need to provide flexible approaches in content, such as advanced readings or math concepts, and problems beyond a given grade level. Flexibility in process is illustrated by providing varied choices or options in modality and models to acquire knowledge. Flexibility in concepts includes allowing students to select major themes in a story or on a social studies issue, for example, and connecting their selected concept across disciplines or genres. Flexibility with products includes providing alternative project-based options for students to illustrate what they have learned throughout the course of a unit. Without the use of some form of flexibility within the curriculum, adjusting for the needs of gifted students in the regular classroom is an impossible task.

Conclusion

Differentiation for gifted learners in heterogeneous settings requires great skill on the part of teachers and the support of peers and principals. Although many barriers exist to making it a reality in practice, improving the school climate for accepting such practices is a necessary first step, followed closely by the development of teacher skills in content and pedagogy. Only when individual differences are acknowledged, embraced, and
acted on in the classroom, will gifted students be adequately served.

References


