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Challenging Gifted Students in the Regular Classroom. ERIC Digest #E513.

How do teachers develop an instructional plan that will be challenging, enlightening, and intriguing to students of different abilities, and still maintain a sense of community within the classroom? This is the central question for educators as they begin the quest of bringing sound instruction to gifted students in regular classroom settings.

Research tells us that a large majority of gifted and talented students spend most of their day in regular classroom settings (Cox, Daniel, & Boston, 1985). Unfortunately, instruction in the regular classroom setting is generally not tailored to meet their unique needs (Archambault et al., 1993; Cox, Daniel, & Boston, 1985; Westberg, Archambault, Dobyns, & Salvin, 1993). This situation is putting gifted students at risk of failing to achieve their potential. Achievement scores below what might be expected from our brightest population provide the evidence (Callahan, 1990; Kantrowitz & Wingert, 1992; Ness & Latessa, 1979).

The challenge for educators is twofold. Our gifted and talented population must have a full service education if we expect these students to thrive in the manner in which they are capable. Second, these students must be involved in educational experiences that are challenging and appropriate to their needs and achievement levels. The place to begin is in the regular classroom.

WHAT ARE THE STEPS TO FULL SERVICE?

The goal for program planners dealing with the challenges of meeting instructional needs of gifted and talented students in regular classroom settings is to create a learning environment in which these students can fully develop their abilities and interests without losing their sense of membership as part of the class. This is a tall order for teachers and students, because the usual remedy is to segregate these students into small homogeneous groups or to assign individual projects. While both of these strategies have their place, neither is sufficient to accomplish the goal. Therefore, we must look beyond the conventional, consider the overall dynamics of the classroom, and plan for a working environment in which all the students can fully develop their abilities and interests within the confines of one organizational unit.

WHAT ARE THE CHARACTERISTICS OF STUDENTS WHO ARE GIFTED AND TALENTED?

When asked this question, most teachers will respond by citing three observations. First, gifted youngsters tend to get their work done quickly and may seek further assignments or direction. Second, they ask probing questions that tend to differ from their classmates in depth of understanding and frequency. Finally, they have interests in areas that are unusual or more like the interests of older students. In fact, these

observations define the characteristics that challenge regular classroom teachers the most as they attempt to bring full instructional service to gifted and talented students. These students potentially differ from their classmates on three key dimensions (Maker, 1982): (1) the pace at which they learn; (2) the depth of their understanding; and (3) the interests that they hold. In order to develop instructional programs that will meet the needs of gifted students in regular classroom settings, it is necessary to address and accommodate these defining characteristics.

WHAT IS THE ROLE OF THE REGULAR CLASSROOM TEACHER?

Most teachers have, on occasion, had students in their classes who know more than they do about some specific topics they are teaching. Teachers who see themselves as facilitators of learning can find a great deal to offer these students. As a facilitator, orchestrator, designer, or coach, the teacher presents the conditions for learning. He or she helps the student develop the skills necessary to learn, understand, and interpret an appropriately differentiated curriculum. This role requires teachers to have skills in both their subject areas (understanding its content, the manner in which its professionals think) and in the management of learning.

WHAT PROGRAM OPTIONS ARE NEEDED TO MEET THE NEEDS

OF THESE STUDENTS?One of the greatest mistakes made by school districts attempting to deliver programming to their gifted and talented students is that they look for unidimensional approaches. The heterogeneity of the gifted population leaves only one remedy that has any chance of succeeding over the long haul. That is a multiple programming approach (Cox, Daniel, & Boston, 1985; Parke, 1989)--one in which a constellation of programs is available in which students can participate based on their abilities, needs, and interests. Some of these options may be specifically tailored to high ability students (such as Advanced Placement, honors, or resource room programs). Others may be found in the course listings for general education that are available to all students but which serve gifted and talented students well (such as student council, school newspaper, Future Problem Solving, computer club, etc.). Profiles of students' abilities, derived from comprehensive assessment batteries, can be used to match students to appropriate programs.

WHAT INSTRUCTIONAL PROVISIONS MUST BE MADE?

Designing instructional opportunities for gifted students in regular classrooms finds its inspiration at the source of the concern--the students. The characteristics of these students lead to the instructional accommodations that are appropriate (The Association

for Gifted, 1989). The accelerated pace at which gifted and talented students learn information requires that flexible pacing strategies (Daniel & Cox, 1988) such as skill grouping, curricular compacting, contracting, and credit by examination be integrated into classroom management formats. The need to explore topics in depth leads program planners to include provisions such as original research, independent studies or investigations, mentorships, or classes at another school or institution of higher learning. When addressing the unique or advanced interests of these students, planners might be inspired to include opportunities such as minicourses, interest groups, clubs, science or art fairs, or internships. The teachers' challenge is to identify student needs, develop and gain access to appropriate programs and curricula that correspond to those needs, and monitor student progress throughout the course of study. The students' challenge is to make the best possible use of the resources available while becoming fully responsible for their own learning.

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