

Catching and Using the Paradox

Successful advocates are able to identify a paradox in the context of a statement or discussion and use it to reinforce or change an opinion. Embedded in the discussion held by educators and parents, are often self-contradictory statements. Educators listening to the presentation of educational ideas that oppose each other can use the paradox to develop an advocacy base.

Recognizing the difference between need and action is the most common paradox to use to initiate advocacy for an idea or procedure. The discrepancy between what should be and what is practiced to arrive at an intended outcome is fundamental to artful advocacy. During a committee meeting, a teacher lamented the lack of faculty support for the identification of gifted students. An examination of the identification procedure revealed that only teachers who requested nomination forms received the document required to begin the identification process. The paradox provided the basis for advocacy to change a procedure that obviously hindered rather than facilitated the intended goal.

Recognizing the paradox between philosophies of practice is another fertile area to pursue in attempting to build an advocacy base. Underscoring the simultaneous support given to competing educational philosophies or theories requires the skills of careful listening and artful argumentation. While conducting the faculty meeting, the principal asked for ways by which the teachers could address the students' disregard for school property. Further on the agenda, the principal discussed the importance of concentrating classroom time on the teaching of mathematics and reading to the exclusion of the teaching of social studies. The principal stated that social studies should be relegated to an "if you have time" status. The paradox in this educational discussion was grist for advocacy. One teacher asked how students can develop an appreciation for the rights of personal property and

the respect accorded to individuals, if the content of social studies is devalued or ignored.

Recognizing the paradox between appropriate and desired behaviors to implement an educational practice is fundamental to becoming a successful advocate. The difference between what should be provided to gifted students and how such a practice is provided often is incongruent. This incompatibility often results in inappropriate implementation that cancels the positive effect of the practice.

Sitting around the table discussing differentiated curricula, the teachers discussed the importance of teaching critical thinking to gifted students. They planned a teacher-directed (didactic) lesson to affect their goal. Noting the paradox, one of the teachers initiated her advocacy for a better and productive match between what and how we teach gifted students. This one discussion prompted an important series of professional development experiences matching differentiated curriculum to differentiated instruction.

The confrontation of ideas that are paradoxical become the basis for discussion and shaping ideas. Importantly, they direct attention to why certain educational ideas are not accepted and practiced. Many of the issues to be addressed in gifted education center on arguments that subtly embed a paradox. Listening and responding to paradoxes can become a platform for advocating on behalf of quality education as well as gifted students. ©GCT