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ART & BORED

Are We Failing Our High Achievers?

By Samantha Cleaver

Back when I taught a mixed-ability group of fourth through sixth graders, I dreaded hearing the words “I’m finished” from my top students. They would speed through their work, turning in their essays or math assignments long before everyone else. While I worked one-on-one with my students who were struggling, my “fast finishers” were off to educational computer sites or the latest Hannah Montana book. And like many teachers, I felt a little guilty.

Teacher Melissa Wagner also admits that filling that extra time gets tricky. “I never give them more work or tell them to help someone else,” she says, “I’m not a believer in that.” Wagner, who teaches social studies at Falcon Middle School in Falcon, Colorado, instead gives the students who finish early a challenging question from the textbook and asks them to research it. That way, they stay focused on the material and expand their understanding with library or online research.

Of course, some high achievers aren’t as easy to engage. When

Don Ambrose, now a professor of education at Rider University in New Jersey, taught sixth grade, one student, Kevin, refused to do his work and disrupted class on a daily basis. Then Ambrose overheard Kevin chatting about complex outer space concepts and realized that he’d underestimated his student. So Ambrose came up with a plan. He set up an outer space center in the back of the room and told his students that if they finished their work early, they could study there. He never had a problem with Kevin again. Sometimes motivating high achievers is “a matter of being more sensitive to what they’re interested in,” says Ambrose.

But too often classrooms are not set up for that kind of sensitivity. Research shows that our schools are consistently failing to provide opportunities for top students to realize their potential. We are teaching to the bottom half of our classes with perhaps devastating ramifications. But here’s the rub: With all the other demands on our time, how can we maximize high achievers’ potential without neglecting the other minds in class?

Another Sputnik Era

Right now, we’re rethinking how we teach high achievers. This isn’t the first time: During the space race, in a rush to put a man on the moon, we increased the focus on math, science, and gifted education. Today, says Jean Peterson, associate professor at Indiana’s Purdue University, “we’re entering another Sputnik Era and are belatedly realizing

4 Myths About “Giftedness”

Myth: Students who have been identified as “gifted” are high achievers.

Fact: Gifted students are those “who have outstanding abilities, are *capable* of high achievement,” but who may or may not achieve it.

Myth: Teachers can easily identify gifted children.

Fact: Teachers are more likely to nominate children as gifted who have good behavior, strong verbal ability, and high family status. That leaves many students from different backgrounds behind.

Myth: Gifted students make everyone else in the class smarter.

Fact: Other students usually do not look to gifted students as role models or find their success motivational.

Myth: Gifted students don’t need help. They do fine on their own.

Fact: Many gifted students know well over half of their grade-level curriculum and are bored. The role of the teacher is crucial to their success.

SOURCE: WWW.ED.GOV, WWW.NAGC.COM



that we haven’t been paying attention to the best and the brightest.” In December 2007, the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development and the *New York Times* reported that students in the U.S. scored lower than 16 other countries in science and lower than 23 others in math. This kicked STEM (science, technology, engineering, and math) programs into gear.

In classrooms, IEPs and getting all students to the proficient level on state tests often override high-achieving students’ needs. Wagner, who also handles the gifted and talented program at Falcon Middle School, says that because of legal issues and IEPs, “I always look at my special education kids first.”

Even as we focus on math and technology, and on the students who aren’t up to par on tests or those with IEPs, we can’t forget our high-achieving students who are talented in literature and the arts, or who are great leaders or collaborators. We need to look at the entire spectrum of achievement, says Ambrose, because by not developing today’s high achievers, we’re losing tomorrow’s scientists, engineers, artists, writers, business leaders, and politicians.

The Hurried Classroom

Today’s teachers are in a hurry to finish tests, increase scores, and get through the curriculum before summer vacation starts. In that rush, says Barbara Radner, director for the Center for Urban Education in Chicago, high-achieving students slide by. No Child Left Behind has brought higher standards and more accountability into classrooms, but it’s also thinned and narrowed the curriculum. “Schools have hit a test barrier,” says Radner. “Scores did go up, but then they flattened out.” Along the way, she says, we have limited our gifted population, offering fewer programs that enable them to excel. This shows up in the small percentage of students exceeding the standards on tests.

Bored or Worse?

In the current rush to get every student on the same “proficient” page, those who

could excel are bored or worse, and we are losing high-potential students from day one. According to the Jack Kent Cooke Foundation’s September 2007 report “Achievement Trap: How America is Failing Millions of High-Achieving Students from Low-Income Families,” while 28 percent of students from low-income families are in the top quartile in first-grade classes, by fifth grade, nearly half of those students have fallen from that rank in reading achievement. And it’s not just students from low-income families. “Seventy percent of the kids who are high ability are underachieving,” says Ambrose. When only 30 percent of high achievers are engaged, the vast majority are sliding through school, unchallenged and unengaged.

The Problem With Grouping

In today’s classrooms, students are rarely grouped by ability, and every classroom has the full bell curve of aptitude, from very low to very high. The average first-grade classroom, says Deborah Ruf, author of *Losing Our Minds: Gifted Children Left Behind*, can have as many as 12 grade-equivalencies and an IQ range of up to 80 points. Some of those 6-year-olds are still learning letters, while others are reading and thinking analytically. The majority of students are in the middle of that range, says Ruf, and “when teachers teach, they teach to the lower third of the graph. So everybody at the top third of the graph is doing a lot of waiting, getting more repetition.” That’s when boredom and bad behavior set in.

What’s at Stake?

Ignore high-achieving students and they may end up frustrated, disciplined for bad behavior, or even depressed. At best, they’re bored; at worst, they won’t make it to graduation. If high-achieving kids aren’t challenged in elementary school, they turn off when they hit challenges in middle or high school, says Betsy McCoach, assistant professor at the University of Connecticut’s Neag School of Education.

Not being challenged in school is more of a risk for low-income students

“Teachers teach to the lower third of the class. So everybody in the top third is doing a lot of waiting.” —Deborah Ruf

than for others. The Jack Kent Cooke Foundation found that while 90 percent of high-achieving high school students attend college, regardless of income level, lower-income high achievers are less likely to graduate. “We’re losing an enormous pool of talent,” says Josh Wyner, executive vice president of the Foundation and lead author of the “Achievement Trap” study. “And these are students who are poised to be leaders.” Many students from low-income families have the potential to help bridge the gap between rich and poor through education. “As a society,” says Wyner, “we should always care when a pool of students obviously prepared to lead loses ground and ultimately doesn’t get that opportunity.”

When it comes to testing, not differentiating for high achievers can backfire. Although high achievers may do well on a general achievement (IQ) test, if they aren’t paying attention in class, they won’t do well on standardized tests. In the long run, if we let these students get by with computer time when they finish early, test scores may actually decline. Middle school teacher Wagner adds, “We’re always worried about getting our low kids up to proficient, but there are so many that could be advanced.”

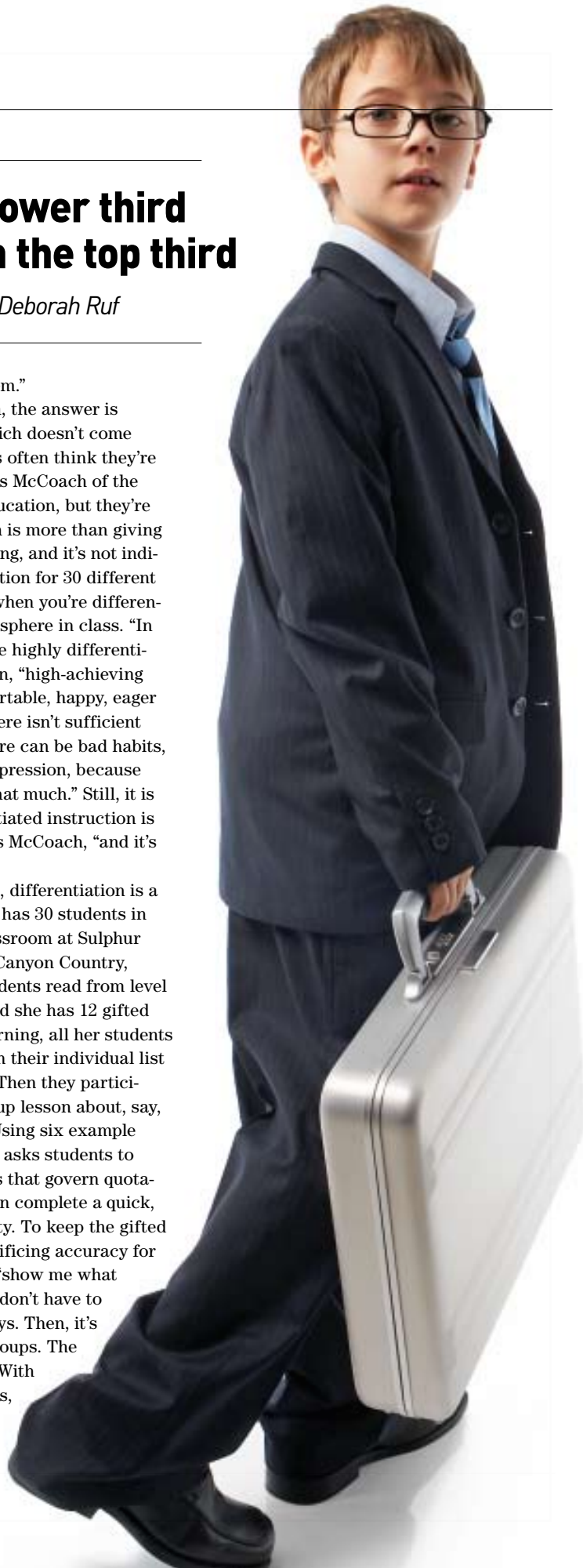
The Solution: Differentiation and Good Habits

The good news from the Jack Kent Cooke Foundation study: Students who enter high school as high achievers are likely to graduate. Challenging them from the start and teaching them good habits gets them through eighth grade and beyond. “If they have a well-established habit of achievement,” says Purdue professor Peterson, “even if the bottom falls out, many times those hab-

its will support them.”

In the classroom, the answer is differentiation, which doesn’t come naturally. Teachers often think they’re differentiating, says McCoach of the Neag School of Education, but they’re not. Differentiation is more than giving choices and grouping, and it’s not individualizing instruction for 30 different kids. You can tell when you’re differentiating by the atmosphere in class. “In classrooms that are highly differentiated,” says Peterson, “high-achieving kids may be comfortable, happy, eager learners. Where there isn’t sufficient differentiation, there can be bad habits, frustration, and depression, because learning matters that much.” Still, it is difficult. “Differentiated instruction is good for kids,” says McCoach, “and it’s hard for teachers.”

For Kim Tredick, differentiation is a daunting task. She has 30 students in her fifth-grade classroom at Sulphur Springs School in Canyon Country, California. Her students read from level 1.6 to level 12.8, and she has 12 gifted students. Each morning, all her students start by working on their individual list of spelling words. Then they participate in a short group lesson about, say, quotation marks. Using six example sentences, Tredick asks students to figure out the rules that govern quotation marks and then complete a quick, independent activity. To keep the gifted students from sacrificing accuracy for speed, the rule is, “show me what you know and you don’t have to do it again,” she says. Then, it’s time for reading groups. The topic: Symbolism. With lower-level students, Tredick discusses the symbolism



cover story

behind pictures, such as a heart for love. With the gifted group, she analyzes a Robert Frost poem line by line.

Though Tredick makes differentiation look easy, she admits that it's taken her years to refine her planning and lessons to incorporate all the levels in her class and make sure that no one has extra time on their hands.

Making Differentiation Work

To make your class work on every level, consider these ideas from teachers and experts.

START AS SCHOLARS: At the start of each year, Tredick establishes an environment where everyone is expected to improve, and success is based on effort. "Part of the academic environment," she says, is that "we're always curious and there is always more we can learn."

PRETEST: Find out who may know more than you realize. "If teachers gave pretests before they started teaching," says McCoach, "they could identify students who need something different, because they would see who's beyond the lesson."

PLAN EARLY AND OFTEN: Really get to know the curriculum so that you can extend it and create assignments that go beyond basics. "You need to know what the students need to know," says Tredick, "and what's coming up, and how to extend it across disciplines."

ENCOURAGE DIFFERENT LEARNING

STYLES: Get a feel for what a student wants to do and then let him or her work in ways that reflect that, recommends Carmen Garcia, curriculum director for the Davidson Academy in Nevada for gifted students. Some kids want to read voraciously, so let them devour harder and harder books. Other kids may want to convert what they're learning into comics or plays.

GROUP ACCORDINGLY: Group kids based on ability sometimes and by interests other times. McCoach recommends dividing your class into three groups: one group that is following the curriculum, one that's working beyond it, and one that needs more help. Then, you can plan for those three groups, instead of working on individual plans for every high achiever and low achiever in your

class. The groups can change, depending on the topic and the kids' strengths in different areas.

LEAVE IT OPEN ENDED: Radner, of Chicago's Center for Urban Education, recommends giving students open-ended questions and assignments, more thinking time, and assignments without models to follow, all of which will challenge high achievers. Allow high achievers to grapple with more difficult questions or assignments based on the concept that the class is learning. That way, all the students are working on the same basic concept, but at their own levels.

MAKE IT REAL: Too often, we push our high achievers faster, skipping them through grades or moving them through the curriculum faster than their peers. Engage them in real-life problem solving instead. Let them "do what the big guys do, even if it's at a junior level," says Joseph Renzulli, director of the National Research Center on the Gifted

and Talented at the University of Connecticut. That could mean coming up with a campaign speech for a presidential candidate or tackling a global issue like climate change.

START SLOW: When you start to differentiate for high achievers, take it one lesson at a time. Reading and math are good places to start. Let students who excel at math move quickly through the curriculum—there's always more math to learn. Students who excel at reading can go deeper into concepts and themes by reading more challenging books and discussing more complex topics.

UP THE CHALLENGE: Don't let students think school is easy. "One of the most important reasons that we should differentiate for high achievers," says McCoach, "is because if they aren't challenged early on, they get the impression that school is something that is not worth the effort." This attitude toward learning will only hurt them later on. □

“Without sufficient differentiation, there can be bad habits, frustration, and depression, because learning matters that much.” —Jean Peterson

