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**The Puzzle of Differentiating Learning for Gifted Students  
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Differentiation is a term that is widely used in educational circles these days. There has been a noticeable increase in recent years in staff development offerings on differentiation strategies; schools’ goals and missions often use this concept in their statements; a great variety of educational literature addresses this topic. Yet, effective differentiation for the gifted student remains elusive and in too many cases, nonexistent. This article will explore some of the reasons for the current status of differentiation and offer some solutions as well.

First, how do we define gifted students? Whether you use the definition of giftedness from the United States Office of Education (US Department of Education, 1993), which describes these students as” children and youth with outstanding talent who perform or show the potential for performing at remarkably high levels of accomplishment when compared with others of their age, experience, or environment”, or as Renzulli (1978) does as the intersection and interaction among three basic clusters of human traits—above average ability, high levels of task commitment, and high levels of creativity, it is arguably the concept of asychronicity that educators must address. The development of gifted students can be advanced in many areas, while some areas of development can be age appropriate or below expectations for their age. This problem makes it difficult for classrooms to provide appropriate challenge for wide ranging skills and development areas.

As with all students, the programming of instruction for gifted students should match the identified needs of students and may take many forms. The entire school program must accommodate the specialized learning and cognition needs of gifted students over time. There are many curriculum models available to help the educator design an appropriate curriculum framework for their programs (Karnes & Bean, 2001; Parke, 1989; VanTassel-Baska & Little, 2003; Van Tassel-Baska & Brown, 2007), but the level of commitment on the part of all educators involved with the student determines its effectiveness. Once the curriculum has a framework for modifications, programs can be implemented for school-wide, within class, and out of class program frameworks. Whole school programs for differentiation include continuous progress curriculum, fast-paced classes, early admission, and multi-aged grouping. All of these whole school programs must accommodate depth, such as in research projects or within small student interest groups. Within-classroom accommodations that respond to the varying needs of gifted students include curriculum compacting, self-instructional programs, learning packets or learning contracts and advanced materials (Kulik, 1993; Parke, 1989). Internet study provides an option both within and without the classroom.

Learning opportunities must provide a flexible program prototype to respond to the varying needs, abilities and interests of students if they are going to be sufficiently individualized and rigorous. Additional programming options include enrichment in the classroom, consultant-teacher programs, resource room/ pullout classes, interest classes, community mentor programs, independent studies, special classes, special schools, magnet schools, summer programs, acceleration, advanced placement, early college entrance, online learning, and dual enrollment in college and high school (Karnes & Bean, 2001). There is such a wide variety of programming options for gifted students that there should never be a dearth of opportunities for these young people, yet it is not unusual to find programs lacking from a state and national level to a school and district level (Baker & Friedman-Nimz, 2000).

There are several curriculum models in the field of gifted education. Eleven curricular models were critiqued by Van Tassel-Baska and Brown (2007) according to the key features that each model contributed to student learning, teacher use, and contextual fit, including alignment to standards and use with special populations of gifted and non-gifted learners. They found that six of the models show some evidence of being effective with gifted learners. Data on the six models favored a discipline-specific approach, although there may be variation in ways of teaching the discipline. Most of the models favored an inquiry-based model of instruction. Curricula based only on higher order processes and independent study yielded few studies of student impacts and those are not consistent. Van Tassel-Baska and Brown (2007) concluded that the strongest body of research evidence support the use of advanced curricula in core areas of learning at an accelerated rate for high ability learners, suggesting that best practice would be to “group gifted students instructionally by subject area for advanced curriculum work that would be flexibly organized and implemented based on students’ documented level of learning within the subject area” (p.351).

VanTassel-Baska and Stambaugh (2005) summarized the research studies of the past decade on the status of differentiation in the regular classroom and noted that the pattern of little differentiation is virtually unchanged. They found several major barriers that prevent educators from implementing effective differentiation for gifted learners.

The first obstacle noted is the lack of sufficient subject matter knowledge (VanTassel-Baska & Stambaugh, 2005). Gifted students bring an advanced and sophisticated knowledge base to the classroom and need educators who can accelerate them in their knowledge base. Another obstacle is that of effective classroom management. When teachers are not strong in classroom management, they do not have the flexibility and skill to manage the range of learning tasks and organizational responsibilities needed to have a variety of tasks ongoing at the same time and may end up quitting such efforts after a few tries. They further found that attitudes and beliefs about learning may hinder a teacher’s ability to differentiate. If teachers do not believe that gifted students have varied learning needs and that they learn at different rates, they are less likely to be inclined to address those differences. Many educators are also outside their comfort zone in modifying curriculum as such work requires additional effort, knowledge, and skill teachers many not have or be willing to develop. Teachers are further challenged by students who are exceptional in more than one area (twice- or thrice-exceptional), are minority, or are from a low SES status. They may be ill-equipped to deal with these additional challenges coupled with a student’s gifted characteristics (VanTassel-Baska & Stambaugh, 2005).

VanTassel-Baska and Stambaugh (2005) also note the common complaint of teachers that there is not sufficient planning time needed on a daily and weekly basis to deal effectively with the management of differentiation in their classrooms. There may also be a lack of administrative support, so critical to the systemic change needed to support differentiation practices within a school or district. Finally, few teachers have the training and support necessary to work with gifted students so they do not know when and where to apply pedagogical skills within their disciplines.

Teachers are only as effective with gifted students as they are knowledgeable about how to work with gifted students. Knapp (1997) notes that the engagement of teachers in professional communities is important in implementing any reform. Making modifications for gifted students is also a reform affected by professional communities. From the vantage point of interpreting reform in terms of professional and organizational learning, the collective enterprise of a school is greater than the sum of its parts. Firestone, Schorr, and Monfils (2004) found that high capacity districts were more collaborative and respectful of teachers’ judgments. This type of collaboration is necessary for schools to be able to modify the learning environment for all students consistently across grade and content areas so that there is continuous support for initiatives that may require flexibility within the traditional curriculum and school framework. If there are not high expectations on a district level and if there is also not a community of teachers within a school who are committed to modifying the educational program for gifted students, such reform is not likely to happen (Newmann, King, & Youngs, 2000).

There are five key characteristics of professional groups and communities that provide additional direction for engaging in reform. These characteristics are shared norms and values, a focus on student learning, collaboration, reflective dialogue, and deprivatization of practice (Gamoran, Anderson, Quiroz, Secada, Williams, & Ashmann, 2003). When all staff within a school share a belief that the learning needs of all students should be respected, then it will be possible for modifications, such as those needed for gifted students, to be made to the traditional program (Malorni, 1996; NAGC, 2005).

Borland (2003) writes that several conditions would have to be in place to make schools effective for gifted students. First, the differentiation of curriculum and instruction would have to be the norm, not the exception. Second, teacher education programs would have to make the ability to differentiate curriculum and instruction a basic skill for all graduates. Third, continuing staff development would have to be provided to maintain, reinforce, and strengthen these types of skills. Finally, the labels used for classification and grouping would have to be replaced by an acceptance of differences as the rule.

Using Borland’s conditions as well as other recommendations noted above, schools should make it a priority to engage in action that will increase the likelihood that gifted students will receive the educational program they need and require. In summary these actions should include the following:

1. Engage the entire school community in committing to providing a differentiated education for its gifted students.
2. Ensure that teachers are working within a professional learning community that supports them in advancing their skills and encourages peer support as well as provides administrative support.
3. Decide on a programming model that will be supported by the professional community as well as the students and parents and build in sufficient training, planning and budget support to ensure its success in implementation.
4. Review progress in differentiation at least yearly through student, parent, and staff surveys as well as other data that shows that students are progressing at a level commensurate with their ability.

Differentiation is not a puzzle that is too hard to solve. Teamwork, time, and talent are all that is needed to reverse this troubling trend of disappearing differentiation for our talented youth.

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