



Last year Marian Leibowitz presented workshops on improving instruction for gifted and talented in 27 states. In this interview by Senior Editor Nancy Olson, Leibowitz gives an overview of what she's seen in programs around the country.

## On Gifted and Talented: A Conversation with Marian Leibowitz

**Q:** What kinds of programs are school districts setting up for the gifted?

**Leibowitz:** Most do what's easiest, not necessarily what's best: they establish pull-out programs. In some ways they're translating the special education model into gifted education. They hire one teacher and pull students out of their regular classes. That way they don't have to do the massive retraining that would be necessary to deal appropriately with the gifted in the regular classroom.

**Q:** What do you think of this way of doing it?

**Leibowitz:** The problem, as I see it,

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*Marian Leibowitz is Special Education Coordinator at the Educational Improvement Center in central New Jersey.*

is that youngsters are scheduled to be gifted. You may be gifted Monday, Wednesday, and Friday from 9:00 to 10:00 when you go to the resource room for gifted, but that's it. This totally ignores the majority of time the youngster is in school.

The result is that many classroom teachers absolve themselves from responsibility for special programming for these youngsters. Unless time is built into the resource teacher's schedule for coordinating with them, the regular teachers don't know or think they shouldn't be involved in what goes on in the gifted class. The channels of communication are cut off.

**Q:** Why do some teachers have trouble teaching the gifted?

**Leibowitz:** In some cases they are intimidated by youngsters who may know more than they do in a specific

subject area. To some degree it's a misconception of the role of the teacher, because a teacher, particularly for gifted youngsters, should be a facilitator, not someone who has all the answers to all the questions. Second, some teachers have a misconception of what gifted youngsters are like. If you ask, "Who are your gifted youngsters?" they think primarily of the high achieving, highly motivated, conforming, well-groomed, female, white students.

**Q:** Not male?

**Leibowitz:** For many teachers, that more assertive type of personality often associated with males is difficult to recognize as gifted. When they ask a question or give a direction and a youngster says why do we have to do it that way—that's not a gifted youngster, that's a behavior problem.

**Q:** Who's doing a good job with gifted and talented?

**Leibowitz:** It's hard to make a true estimate when you only come in as a consultant. What I often see, as I travel, is what people want me to see, and I often hear the rationale behind programs. That's very different from looking at what really exists.

Most programs are pull-out programs. There are very few that focus on retraining the entire staff to deal with gifted youngsters. Some districts have self-contained classes for the gifted. In my mind, those are pull-out programs, too—total pull-out.

I've taught self-contained classes for the gifted and I don't think that's the best approach. Looking at all the areas of giftedness or talent, it would be impractical to set up segregated classes; you'd have classes in leadership and classes in creative thinking.

It's not really the organization but what happens in the program that's critical. I've seen some terrific teachers who are providing an appropriate program for their gifted youngsters right in the regular classroom.

Most of the programs I have visited are just being developed. The ones that have been in existence for years have focused on the intellectually gifted. The new emphasis on other gifts and talents is making even those programs reassess what they are doing.

**Q:** How did this new focus come about?

**Leibowitz:** With the wave of compensatory programs came a realization that many youngsters we previously put aside may be able to do outstanding things. With our traditional identification procedures, they were overlooked.

**Q:** How do you identify students whose performance is average or low but who have great potential?

**Leibowitz:** If you assume that gifted youngsters get 100 percent on all their tests and have excellent penmanship and keep their margins straight, it's very difficult. If you begin to look at the whole way gifted people function you realize that gifted youngsters may be under-achieving because of the system. They're functioning so differently that identifying them requires a great

deal of sensitizing of the staff.

Through inservice you can point out some of the characteristics of gifted youngsters—the way they approach problems. When I go to a school district, teachers often say, "I think we identified the wrong kids—the ones we have are gifted, but I'm thinking about Bob in my class, and the kinds of questions he asks."

**Q:** What happens to the gifted in high schools?

**Leibowitz:** Many high schools have independent study programs or work/study programs or they may have made linkages with higher education institutions. But when you ask about such opportunities, the schools don't consider them part of their gifted program.

A lot of secondary schools have Advanced Placement courses or honors courses. Some question whether honors courses are really programs for gifted education. Again, it's not so much what you call them; it's what happens in those programs.

One interesting thing I see is a backlash from students who say, "I really like being identified as gifted

and it's been fun, but could I now please come out of the program?"

**Q:** Why is that?

**Leibowitz:** Particularly at the secondary level, students value, more than anything else, being with their peers. They want to be one of the crowd, and unless the crowd is gifted and talented, they're not interested.

A second thing students identify is unrealistic expectations on the part of their parents. Once youngsters are identified as being gifted and talented, the pressure increases. Parents become very concerned about school and closely monitor everything that happens there.

Another factor is that when students are pulled out, they are responsible for all the work they miss while they are gone. They very quickly ascertain that they are doing twice as much work as everybody else. There is almost an underlying hostility on the part of regular classroom teachers who make comments like, "Well now that you're in a gifted program, I would expect your papers to be neater." "If you don't finish that, you can't go to the gifted program." And then in many cases what happens in the gifted program is not different; it's just more work. We're turning out a generation of typists; we have all these kids who type all those term papers.

**Q:** What would you like to see happening?

**Leibowitz:** In my fantasy life I imagine that we can deal with all gifted children in the regular classrooms. We'll always need some support services, but I'd like to see them on a much more flexible basis. I'd like to see students involved in dynamic, meaningful, relevant things *in the classroom*. When special help or extra time is needed for a particular project, students could work with someone outside the classroom—but just for the length of that project, not necessarily three times a week or whatever. I would like to see people used in a dual capacity: working with students, doing things with them, for them, identifying their needs, but also helping regular classroom teachers provide the differentiated program students need in the regular classroom. ■



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