

Appropriate Curriculum for Gifted Learners

Educators can provide sound interventions for gifted students if they carefully consider their special needs.

Gifted students, like other populations that differ from the norm, have special learning needs that require a special educational program (see fig. 1). Unfortunately, many school districts do little to adapt the general curriculum to meet the needs of the gifted. These students should have advanced instruction, intensive involvement in their areas of interest, and exposure to material not usually taught. Instead, they typically get nothing more than a set-aside contact time of two to four hours per week.

Four Mistaken Beliefs

Efforts to provide appropriate services for gifted students are hampered by four mistaken beliefs common among educators.

One of these mistaken beliefs is that a "differentiated" curriculum for the gifted means "anything that is different from what is provided for all learners." For example, several years ago computer literacy was assumed to be appropriate for gifted students simply because it was "new" and not in the general curriculum.

Another mistaken belief is that all experiences provided for gifted learners must be creative and focused on process. In many gifted programs, open-ended activities, creative thinking, and problem solving become ends in themselves. Core domains of

learning have been ignored as content for gifted learners.

A third mistaken belief is that one curriculum package will provide what is needed for the entire gifted population. In reality, these students need

multiple resources, units, and courses at multiple levels.

Finally, many educators mistakenly believe that acceleration is harmful because it pushes children socially and leaves gaps in their knowledge.

Characteristics	Learning Needs	Curriculum Implications
Ability to handle abstractions	Presentation of symbol systems at higher levels of abstraction	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Reorganized basic skills curriculum Introduction of new symbol systems at earlier stages of development (computers, foreign language, statistics, etc.)
Power of concentration	Longer time frame that allows focused in-depth work in an area of interest and challenge	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Diversified scheduling of curriculum work "Chunks" of time for special project work and small group efforts
Ability to make connections and establish relationships among disparate data	Exposure to multiple perspectives and domains of inquiry	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Interdisciplinary curriculum opportunities such as special concept units, humanities, and the inter-related arts Use of multiple text materials and resources
Ability to memorize well and learn rapidly	Rapid movement through basic skills and concepts in traditional areas; economical organization of new areas of learning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Restructured learning frames (i.e., speed up and reduce reinforcement activities) New curriculum organized according to its underlying structure
Multiple interests; wide information base	Opportunity to choose area(s) of interest and to study a chosen area in greater depth	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Learning center areas in the school for extended time use Self-directed learning packets Individual learning contracts

Fig. 1. Curriculum Implications of Characteristics and Learning Needs of the Gifted

Most school districts reserve acceleration for a very few students; yet of all the interventions schools provide for the gifted, acceleration is best supported by research (Daurio 1980, Kulik and Kulik 1984).

An Appropriate Curriculum

An appropriate curriculum for gifted students has three equally important dimensions: (1) a content-based mastery dimension that allows gifted learners to move more rapidly through the curriculum; (2) a process/product/research dimension that encourages in-depth and independent learning; and (3) an epistemological concept dimension that allows for the exploration of issues, themes, and ideas across curriculum areas (VanTassel-Baska et al. 1988).

Effective differentiation takes into account both the written and the delivered curriculum (see fig. 2). Manip-

Curriculum	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Compression by using a diagnostic-prescriptive approach for basic skill learning • Acceleration of content • Reorganization of content according to higher-level skills and concepts • Infusion of higher-order thinking skills into content 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Development of advanced products related to the content area • Integration of content area by key ideas, issues, and themes • Integration of ideas across related content areas
Instruction	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Faster-paced instructional pattern • More frequent use of inquiry techniques • Use of varied questioning strategies that include convergent, divergent, and evaluative 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Use of cooperative learning groups for problem solving and special projects (cluster by ability/interest) • More frequent use of discussion • Greater use of independent contract work and study • Use of a variety of instructional strategies
Materials	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Advanced reading level • Organization by concepts rather than isolated skills • Higher-level questions for discussion • Ideas for group and independent student investigation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Problem sets, exercises, and activities organized from simple to complex and including examples that extend 2-4 years off level • Extension activities that allow students to pursue a topic in-depth • Idea connections to multiple areas of the curriculum
Fig. 2. Appropriate Adaptations of Curriculum, Instruction, and Materials for Gifted Learners	

General Education Trend	Rationale	Implications for the Gifted	Curriculum Response for the Gifted
A greater emphasis on mathematics, science, and technology	International studies show U.S. students lag behind students in many other nations in these core areas.	Top students in the U.S. show even greater gaps in achievement when compared to top students in Russia, Japan, and West Germany.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Academies/residential schools for the gifted with a focus on mathematics and science • Advanced opportunities for students talented in these content areas (talent search model) • Programs that link scientists/mathematicians to schools and students
A focus on internationalizing education (i.e., increasing awareness of other cultures, languages, and world geography)	A recognition of global interdependence, of multinational interests, and the importance of being competitive in a world trade market	Gifted students are more likely to constitute the leadership of tomorrow. Consequently, providing a strong education in global issues is important.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Earlier intervention in foreign language; encouragement to learn two languages in addition to English • Special programs organized around global issues • Seminars in international studies
Focus on the infusion of thinking skills into the curriculum	National assessment results indicate that reasoning capacities of high school students are severely deficient (only 14% could handle simple inference and deductive reasoning problems).	We need to enhance areas of cognitive strength and broaden the capacity to use more thinking processes, to encourage students to think more broadly.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Movement toward direct teaching of metacognitive processes • Programs organized around thinking processes: analysis, synthesis, evaluation, and divergent skills
A strong accountability movement, using tests as benchmarks of educational progress and standards of learning as evidence of minimum levels of competency	A 20-year decline in test scores among school-aged populations, particularly on the SAT and other competency-based achievement measures	We need to refocus the core skill areas of the curriculum at maximum competency levels.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Curriculum adaptation in core content areas • Evaluation models that are responsive to differentiated curriculum goals and objectives

Fig. 3. The Relationship of General Education Trends to Gifted Education

ulation of the written curriculum alone will not bring about curriculum appropriateness for the gifted; but if it is accompanied by a shift in instructional techniques *and* a procedure for reviewing and adopting text materials, the results should be positive.

Curriculum Planning

School districts need to plan carefully what benefits they want gifted learners to get from specialized programs and find ways to evaluate whether the students are getting them. Districts should develop a scope-and-sequence chart for the gifted that reflects the content adaptations to be made from kindergarten through 12th grade, the progressive development of higher-level skills and concepts, the complex ideas students are expected to integrate, and the sophistication of products anticipated. Figure 3 identifies five trends in general education and shows how educators across the country are applying them to enhance the curriculum for gifted learners.

Programs for the gifted should accommodate individual differences by adjusting time frames for learning specific skills or concepts, allowing students to "test out" of courses and grade levels, and developing policies for early entrance into and exit from program options.

A Good Fit

Providing appropriate curriculum for the gifted requires consideration of the needs of this special population, so

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Most school districts reserve acceleration for a very few students; yet of all the interventions schools provide for the gifted, acceleration is best supported by research.

that interventions for them show a "good fit." Content should be learned in conjunction with desirable process skills and paradigms. There should be alternative projects for independent student work, and integrated learning opportunities across curriculum areas. A sound curriculum for gifted students provides varied and challenging experiences that will develop their potential for the sake of both themselves and society. □

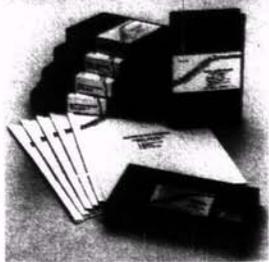
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