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.

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<th>Learning Needs</th>
<th>Curriculum Implications</th>
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<td>Ability to handle abstractions</td>
<td>Presentation of symbol systems at higher levels of abstraction</td>
<td>Reorganized basic skills curriculum, introduction of new symbol systems at earlier stages of development (computers, foreign language, statistics, etc.)</td>
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<td>Power of concentration</td>
<td>Longer time frame that allows focused in-depth work in an area of interest and challenge</td>
<td>Diversified scheduling of curriculum work, “Chunks” of time for special project work and small group efforts</td>
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<td>Ability to make connections and establish relationships among disparate data</td>
<td>Exposure to multiple perspectives and domains of inquiry</td>
<td>Interdisciplinary curriculum opportunities such as special concept units, humanities, and the interrelated arts, use of multiple text materials and resources</td>
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<td>Ability to memorize well and learn rapidly</td>
<td>Rapid movement through basic skills and concepts in traditional areas; economical organization of new areas of learning</td>
<td>Restructured learning frames (i.e., speed up and reduce reinforcement activities), new curriculum organized according to its underlying structure</td>
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<td>Multiple interests; wide information base</td>
<td>Opportunity to choose areas of interest and to study a chosen area in greater depth</td>
<td>Learning center areas in the school for extended time use, self-directed learning packets, individual learning contracts</td>
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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-
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 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.

References

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