

Reaching Potential

How GT Educators Are Making a Difference

by John Franklin

Imagine if Michael Jordan never had a coach who believed in him while he was growing up, or if Mary Lou Retton had never worked with Bela Karolyi. Each might still have achieved athletic fame, but having someone who saw their incredible potential and pushed them to succeed undoubtedly improved their odds.

As self-evident as this seems, many educators say that the importance of having a focused instructor is often overlooked when it comes to working with gifted and talented (GT) students. "There's a myth that surrounds gifted students and GT education," says Sally Walker, the executive director of the Illinois Association for Gifted Children. "People say that programs aren't needed because gifted kids will make it on their own." Research shows, however, that if students are not challenged, they adapt to the norm. "When this happens, we lose that great potential that's out there," she notes.

Fear of losing students with above-average potential is a concern felt by many teachers, particularly at a time when so much emphasis is placed on raising the scores of lower-achieving students. "Nowadays, budgets are strained, and I think public attention is focused on children who are not yet at goal level," says Jeanne Purcell, the state director for gifted education in Hartford, Conn. "We lost 25 percent of our [gifted] programs last year." Similar program and funding cuts have also been reported in Illinois and other states.

Losing programs for gifted students means that the needs of many talented children may go unmet, a fact that angers a number of educators. "No Child Left Behind means *no child* is left behind; it doesn't mean no low-achieving child," asserts Doris Kurtz, superintendent of the Consolidated School District of New Britain, Conn. "All children need to be given the opportunity to reach all levels of proficiency."

Despite such cutbacks, many teachers and officials are finding ways to reach their gifted students and enable them to develop their potential. "Gifted children learn differently in terms of depth and pace," says Jane Clarenbach, director of public education for the National Association for Gifted Children in Washington, D.C. "There are many variables and varieties of GT education now, and there are also some opportunities that did not exist before."

One of the biggest challenges educators face when trying to recognize gifted students is that no standard definition exists as to what constitutes a "gifted" child. "There is no clinical



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definition for being gifted or talented,” says Susan Rhodes, principal of Iles Elementary School in Petersburg, Ill. “Every state probably has its own definition, and what is considered gifted in one part [of the state] may not be so in another.”

Recognizing Giftedness

According to Paul Slocumb, coauthor of *Removing the Mask: Giftedness in Poverty* and a GT educator for 27 years, most school definitions focus on “students who exhibit potential above and beyond what one sees in others of their age, experience, or environment.”

Unfortunately, Slocumb says, we don't always factor in experience and environment. “So much of our perception of brightness is rooted in language. Kids in poverty may not be recognized as easily as middle class children because kids in poverty use different expressions” and may downplay their exceptionalities to avoid ridicule. Certain slang terms, such as “My bad,” or “Whassup?” may lead to misconceptions about a student's potential. “When you look at kids who are in poverty, you need to find the ones who have creative uses of language and who deviate from the norm,” Slocumb advises.

Finding those diamonds in the rough, however, is a difficult task. Students with particular gifts—especially those from economically disadvantaged backgrounds—frequently try to hide their talents to demonstrate solidarity with family and peers. “Remember, if you come from poverty and embrace middle class values such as work, achievement, and material security, you may be seen as abandoning your roots,” Slocumb cautions. For those children, the concepts of family and relationships are very important. When kids begin demonstrating academic prowess, friends and others might challenge them by saying, “Oh, you're trying to be white!” or “You're forgetting your raisin's” (i.e., how you were raised), Slocumb adds. To preserve their acceptance, students may pull back from demonstrating their full capabilities.

As a result, Slocumb advises teachers to exercise caution when trying to draw out a student's potential. “You have to learn to play by different rules,” he says. “You have to build relationships and show students you respect them. If they feel you're trying to change them, they will think you don't respect who they are.” Such a perception can make teaching and learning all the more difficult—for both teacher and student.

Teacher Homework

To overcome these obstacles, experts advise taking several steps. “One of the first things teachers should do is pre-assess their students,” Purcell asserts. “You need to know your kids and which strategies to use for meeting the different needs of all the learners in your classroom.” In her own experience, one case highlights this particularly well: “We asked educators in grades 3–5 to do a pre-assessment, and they found that the brightest students knew half the material before they even opened the textbook.” Had teachers gone ahead with their initial lesson plans without assessing the students before-hand, those students would likely have lost interest in learning almost before the year began.

Once a student's abilities have been identified, teachers can move toward developing a program suited to the learner's particular needs. “If you're going to break a cycle, you need a

plan," Slocumb says. Getting students to sign contracts with teachers, for example, helps formalize objectives and goals while fostering deeper and more personal relationships between students and teachers. This, in turn, helps students grow academically and emotionally.

Another technique Slocumb suggests is to solicit assistance and seek inspiration from outside or nontraditional sources. "If you want to make it 'cool' to do different things, you need to give kids a support system," he says. "That needs to be done with people that we don't necessarily associate certain things with—the football coach saying something's important, for instance, or the band teacher or the custodian."

As teachers' relationships with their students progress, further steps can be taken to get to know what makes particular students tick. "Teachers should use every means to get to know their kids," says Carol Ann Tomlinson, professor of education at the University of Virginia and author of *The Differentiated Classroom: Responding to the Needs of All Learners*. "Journal entries, exit cards, interviews—all these things can be used to find out what kids like and what their dreams are."

Once relationships are established and teachers understand students' needs, they can then make their students' learning experiences more rewarding by letting students choose alternate reading materials or come up with their own assignments. "It's important to continue pondering how you can teach at a high level of challenge," Tomlinson says. "If we're really teaching at a high level and really expecting kids to work at a high level of insight, then we need to think about what can make the year better for them."

Making the year better is essential, sources say, because if students' interests are not identified early enough, changing their misconceptions about learning becomes all the more difficult later. "Research has shown that if [gifted] children are not identified by the 3rd grade, they start to digress," says Rhodes. "Students tend to get that underachievement desire next—where they want to go on easy street because they're afraid of challenge. Up to that point, they've always succeeded."

Reversing that tendency is far more difficult than intervening early to prevent it, according to experts. "I think it's become a more widespread belief that we can't focus strictly on remediation anymore," Purcell says. "We need to focus on rigor for these kids; our focus has to be on enrichment and challenging learners in an ongoing and systematic way for all children."

Changing Directions

But even if a teacher looks for indicators of student potential and actively works to determine students' needs, many say that meeting the needs of gifted students will likely remain a challenge until courses aimed at understanding gifted learners become more standard in undergraduate education programs. "Many teachers don't have adequate professional development when it comes to understanding gifted and talented education," Rhodes points out. "I've been in districts where over 50 percent of the teachers had less than five years of teaching experience. They think that if a kid's getting an A, he or she is learning."

Clarenbach agrees. "One of the biggest problems for GT education is that teachers aren't

getting the preparation that they need," she says. "If the teacher has not heard of the term [GT] or studied about the needs of these kids, how can the teacher serve their needs?"

In response to this problem, Clarenbach's organization has begun to push for greater access to grants that would allow universities to provide training for more teachers of gifted kids. "We as a society recognize artistic and athletic prowess," she points out. "We need to learn to recognize intellectual prowess as well."

Improving that recognition and understanding is an ongoing struggle. "Many professionals continue to see giftedness as fixed rather than as a set of fluid traits that are characterized by varying behaviors influenced significantly by environmental stimuli," says Rick Olenchak, president of the National Association of Gifted Children and director of the Urban Talent Research Institute at the University of Houston in Texas. "School budgets are oriented toward teaching minimalist skills and knowledge," he says, and the result has been an emphasis on minimalism rather than maximizing student potential. "Teachers and administrators seldom have enough energy—let alone money—to do much more than aim most of their educational efforts at the basics."

Rather than focusing primarily on the needs of lower-achieving students, many experts argue that educators should learn to differentiate instruction to better meet the needs of all the learners in a classroom and ensure that each child receives the best education possible. Cutting programs aimed at one group or another runs the risk of alienating parents and students. "We need to be very, very careful in these times of tight budgets," Purcell says. "If a program is cut, it is difficult to resurrect. What can happen is that you may get one side pitted against another, and that polarizes parents."

Parents and teachers must recognize the importance of meeting the needs of all students, Purcell notes, not just those at either end of the spectrum. "It really depends on the nature of the community and how the issues are handled," she adds. "You don't want neighbors to stop speaking to one another. You want them to understand that the goal of education is to help every child reach his or her potential."

And reaching that potential, sources say, requires ensuring that all students have appropriate instruction that meets their individual needs. "Remember, we would never take our best basketball player and say he or she doesn't need a coach to become successful," Tomlinson notes. Likewise, "we can't say that our most able students don't need what a teacher can do for them."

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