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Developing and Nurturing Gifted Students' Strengths

There is nothing more unequal than the equal treatment of unequal people.

Thomas Jefferson

Every classroom has children with a wide range of abilities. As the teacher, you are responsible for acknowledging and fulfilling the special needs of each child, but recognizing individual needs is not always an easy task—some children show their talents outwardly, but others are often quiet observers. It can be even more difficult to identify gifted children: standardized testing can aid teachers in determining those who have a high intellectual potential, but these tests do not always provide information concerning the creative and affective domains that frequently affect a child's success in developing talented behaviors.

As a teacher of gifted and talented children for more than eleven years, I now know that each gifted child is different in his or her own way; all gifted children have unique abilities that must be understood and addressed. These students bring their own interests, observations, knowledge, and talents to the classroom. Our challenge as educators is to recognize and encourage these qualities so that our students learn something new every day.

■ THE CHALLENGE OF CHALLENGING CURRICULUM

Children who are gifted learn content easily; these children need novel and challenging curriculum to reach their potential. C. June Maker and Aleene B. Nielson (1995) note in their book, *Teaching Models in Education of the Gifted*, “Since gifted students can acquire information more rapidly and almost effortlessly, they should apply it in new situations, use it to develop new ideas, evaluate its appropriateness, and use it to develop new products” (p. 5). They need *challenging* work, not just more work. Open-ended questions, guided discovery, complex abstract ideas, problem solving, freedom of choice, higher-level thinking skills, and creativity are important components for a quality education for gifted students (Maker and Nielson, 1995) and need to be properly addressed for school success.

Addressing Both Weaknesses and Strengths

Another problem compounds the difficulties of providing the right lessons for students: a child who is labeled “gifted” is not necessarily gifted in all areas. Some children excel in math while they struggle in language arts. Take, for example, Paul, one of my students.

Paul

When I first met Paul, I asked him his name and he didn't reply—thankfully, his friend told me his name! After talking with his regular classroom teacher, I found out that Paul didn't like to talk or share many of his ideas in class, but his teacher said that he loved math. In fact, Paul excelled in mathematics well beyond his grade level. He could do calculations in his head very quickly and accurately, solve complex math problems effortlessly, and see patterns easily using his visual/spatial intelligence. Yet when I gave Paul a language arts task, he struggled to accomplish it. He was all about the numbers.

Teachers need to realize that gifted students may not excel in all areas; on the other hand, these children do have great potential in certain subjects and it is important to provide them with experiences to strengthen this potential. The key is to challenge the students in a way that helps them grow to be more well-rounded.

Children like Paul need be challenged in their area of strength. I wanted Paul to grow in math while also trying to strengthen his area of weakness, his communication skills. To do this, I asked him to share with the rest of the class how he solved a particular math problem. Explaining math problems was engaging to him and also strengthened his weaker areas. I believe encouraging gifted children in all curricular areas will assist them in the future. In my experience, these children want to take risks and pursue their interests, and thrive on being challenged in and outside the classroom.

WHAT THIS BOOK OFFERS ■

This book is designed to help K–8 teachers identify a student's areas of potential giftedness and provide appropriate activities and units of study to develop and nurture these talents to their fullest. The earlier we can identify children's strengths, the better we, as educators, can guide their learning. When gifted students learn early on that they can receive good grades for applying little effort on a project, they conclude that being smart means doing things easily. Then when these students are presented with a complex task, they have a hard time tackling the challenge and becoming a risk-taker. Also, gifted students may think school is boring and lose interest in learning if they are not challenged in their school career.

Identifying giftedness in children can sometimes be a difficult task because many classroom teachers may not know the characteristics to look for. In addition, sometimes children are not considered gifted because of what the teacher views as their inappropriate or unacceptable behavior within the classroom. They may often disagree and argue their point of view with others; they are not interested in details; they may hand in messy or careless work; they refuse to accept authority, tend to be bossy, and dominate group situations, discussions, or others; and they can become bored easily with routine tasks, which causes misbehavior and daydreaming. It is my hope that you will see these characteristics as evidence of a gifted child, not of a troublemaker who needs to be punished.

Spotting a child's giftedness through regular observations is very important, especially because not all forms of talents are easily testable. For example, creative students may be overlooked because most standardized tests do not test for creativity. With this knowledge in mind, teachers can use this book as an informal guide for assessing students' gifted potential. This book should not replace formal testing; it should be used in conjunction with a variety of measures. Remember, the key to identification is regular observation—trust your own judgment if you feel a student shows gifted tendencies.

I have written this book to help provide challenging and engaging lessons and activities to stimulate gifted children. These activities offer immediate informal assessment of students' strengths and needs in the cognitive, affective, and creative areas, which can assist in planning programs and learning experiences that will better awaken their unique talents. In addition to developing your students' abilities, the analysis activities can also be used as extension and enrichment of your everyday curriculum. The units of study and activities are intended to motivate, excite, and entice students to learn more in their area of strength.

HOW THE BOOK IS ORGANIZED ■

The book is broken down into the following categories: language arts, creative thinking, critical thinking, interpersonal and intrapersonal intelligence, mathematical ability, and visual/spatial awareness. Each chapter begins with informal activities that I call "analysis activities." I use the term *analysis* because the activities are not outright tests; they are tools to help you uncover the skills and talents that children in your classroom have.

Teacher notes and grading guides are listed, and following the analysis activities are lessons, activities, and units of study to use with students who excel in the subject. Also within each section I have listed characteristics that are common in students gifted in the subject. Some of these characteristics are similar in many of the areas. Several of the lessons can be placed into a few of the chapters, but I placed them where I thought that they would best tie into the curricular area.

Many of the projects that are in this book help gifted children use and develop their creativity in different ways. Paul Torrance (1979), a pioneering researcher who studied creative thinking, describes the four components of creativity as fluency, flexibility, elaboration, and originality, categories that are still used today. Fluency pertains to generating as many ideas as possible to open-ended questions. Flexibility is looking at ideas in different ways or from different perspectives, whereas elaboration is embellishing or adding to an idea. Originality is having unique ideas and developing them. It is important to incorporate all of these components in order to establish and strengthen creativity within the classroom, especially to ensure that creative thinkers develop their gifts.

■ USING ANALYSIS ACTIVITIES

Assessing a student's strengths is essential to providing him or her with the appropriate curriculum. The informal analysis activities, which are presented at the beginning of each section, can be used by the classroom teacher or the gifted-and-talented teacher to gauge the student's area of strength. These collections of activities and games offer the teacher tools with diagnostic and teaching potential. Administering these activities to small groups of students or individually is recommended. Best of all, these activities are ready to use and only limited materials are required.

By administering the activities, you can obtain important information about your students and their strengths, which can be put into their permanent folders to show their growth throughout the years. Please remember that the results of the analysis activities should be used as a guide to help discover the strengths of students, not a cutoff mark for being gifted or not-gifted.

Selecting and Administering the Activities

Select the activities that you want your students to complete. Keep in mind that it's not necessary for all students to complete all of the analysis activities. Choose from the activities in each target area and select those that are appropriate for the student. If you don't know where the student's strengths lie, administer all of the activities that you feel may be *appropriate* for that student. But if you know that the child excels in mathematics, there's no need for her to do the math analyses because you already know where her strength lies. Don't waste your time or the students' by administering the analysis activities in their known strength area. The lesson ideas within the section that follows will provide useful and challenging learning experiences for that student—without the unnecessary testing.

Although it's possible to administer many of these analyses out loud, I suggest that you copy those activities you will use on colored paper for durability and make an additional copy of the activities so that anecdotal notes relative to the students' responses can be taken. Some activities do not need to be duplicated. Guidelines and suggested instructions are provided for each activity; a minimal amount of extra supplies will be needed, such as drawing materials or a set of pentominoes.

Grading

After administering the analysis activities, refer to the Teacher's Notes for acceptable answers. Some activities have no one correct answer; however, a wide variety of creative answers will show that students are strong in that particular area. When you are done critiquing the activities, gather all the activity notes together and place them in the student's folder. These activities should provide a better understanding of the student's needs and talents, which then can be addressed with the appropriate learning opportunities. Please remember that these are informal analysis assessment tools and should not be used to exclude someone from a gifted program. There is no cutoff score for each analysis activity that indicates whether a student is gifted or non-gifted. The activities were developed to show where students' strengths lie and then provide challenging ideas and units of study for those students to extend their learning.

WHAT TO DO AFTER AREAS OF STRENGTH ARE IDENTIFIED

After administering the activities and discovering a student's strength, what do you do next? The sections following the analyses are designed to provide engaging activities and units of study to enhance and broaden learning experiences. Keep this book handy throughout the year to add a spark to curriculum learning, engage learners, and help students grow in their area of strength—you'll notice that your students will have a positive attitude toward school and be more productive in their own learning.

As noted researchers Caine and Caine (1991) put it, "Brain research establishes and confirms that multiple complex and concrete experiences are essential for meaningful learning and teaching" (p. 5). Once you know the subject in which the student should be challenged, it is easy to provide the proper activities to accelerate that student's educational growth.

Novelty has been shown to be a very important component in the successful education of gifted students, and novelty is what this book hopes to provide. Teachers of gifted students need to get the students' curiosity engaged so they maintain a love of learning instead of losing it. Gardner (1991) states, "It is effective to use subject matter that can be related to the students' own lives and to engage students in activities affording them the opportunity to take a hand at various roles" (p. 237). The activities in this book encourage the use of technology, role-playing, and community service, all of which enable students to see how the subject matter can be used in their everyday lives.

The lessons in the book can be used with individuals, small groups, or the entire class, as you see fit. For example, some of the lessons in the creativity section can be used with the whole class—everyone is creative and lessons on how to enhance and develop these skills will benefit all of your students. Other units, however, will not be appropriate for the whole class because of the challenging content level. I have found that grouping gifted students together by interest level or area of strength is the best possible scenario for them when tackling a challenge. Gifted children feel more comfortable showing and sharing their strengths with children who think like they do. “Gifted students can better understand and accept their learning difference if there are others just like them in the class” (Winebrenner & Devlin, 1996, p. 1). When students are grouped together based on a topic of interest, they become highly motivated and excited about their own learning (Reed & Westberg, 2003). It should also be noted that many gifted children like to work alone on projects, so I also give them a chance to work independently.

Delving into new, appropriate enrichment experiences will lead our brains to grow and change (D’Arcangelo, 1998). Teachers also need to design learning around students’ interests, immersing them in complex, interactive experiences that provide real, meaningful challenges for them. I make a point of presenting lessons that are very different from the regular curriculum, which piques students’ interest and motivates them to learn something new. Students that I’ve worked with can’t wait to tackle these new problems, and now your students can be just as excited!