Differentiating the Curriculum for Gifted Learners

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Imagine this scenario: Just before school starts in August, your principal informs you that your class will have several gifted children in it. He believes that because you are a competent teacher, you will also be a great teacher for gifted children. He informs you that these bright young children can even be the tutors and special helpers for those who are struggling in your class.

This scenario may cause teachers to panic. One common fear that teachers have about teaching gifted children is that they may know more than they do about certain topics like the solar system and George Washington. Another common fear is that the teacher won’t know how to extend and adapt content for these advanced students. Teachers may envision students finishing their work far ahead of the rest of the class and constantly asking, “What do I do now?” Teachers may wonder how they can possibly teach their expected content to all of their students with extra instruction for struggling
students and extension of materials for gifted students. If this scenario becomes reality for you, you must first seek an understanding of the term “gifted.” It is also very important to become informed about and recognize common misconceptions about gifted students.

**What Does “Gifted” Mean?**

As you search to understand what it means to be a gifted student, it is quite possible that you will find many different definitions for the term “gifted.” It seems as though everybody has their own ideas about giftedness. This, in turn, affects decisions about what should be done for gifted children. “Unfortunately, there are many misconceptions of the term, all of which become deterrents to understanding and catering to the needs of children identified as gifted” ("Giftedness and the Gifted," 1990, p. 2). The topic of deciding which children are gifted and how to best educate these students can sometimes cause controversy between those who provide funds, those who provide state and district guidelines for the education of gifted students, administrators, teachers, parents, and even the students themselves. Therefore, it is essential that educators have a research-based understanding of the term “gifted” before they begin to make decisions about how to educate their gifted students.

**How Researchers Define “Gifted”**

The quest to define giftedness has changed throughout the last century. In the past, the term giftedness was closely associated with IQ. Lewis Terman, a professor at Stanford University in the early 20th century, is credited as the first person to use the term “gifted child.” He is thought of as the “father” of the movement for gifted education because he developed the first test to measure intelligence in 1916, although efforts to educate gifted students date back as far as 1868 (NAGC, 2005a). He called it the Intelligence Quotient test, or IQ test. His IQ
test focused heavily upon analytical skills and memory. At first, Terman believed that the intelligence of a person alone defined their giftedness. It is an idea that still circulates today. Nowadays, if you search “IQ test” on an Internet search engine, you will find a wide variety of tests that “will notify you” of your intelligence quotient, often for a fee. However, after many years of research, Terman concluded that personality had as much to do with giftedness as IQ. He believed that a gifted person needed emotional and social confidence, as well as a drive to be successful [NAGC, 2005a].

In 1971, the Marland Report to Congress outlined six areas of giftedness, which included general ability, specific academic aptitude, creative or productive thinking, leadership ability, visual and performing arts, and psychomotor ability. These six areas are commonly utilized and discussed throughout research and educational papers about teaching gifted students, although psychomotor ability has since been excluded from the official federal definition [NAGC, 2005a].

Various researchers since Terman have put forth their contributions to the ever-changing perceptions of the meaning of the term gifted. Renzulli defines a gifted person by the following traits: above average, though not necessarily superior, general ability; a high level of task commitment; and creativity. All of these stress external behaviors. He prefers to say “gifted behaviors” instead of gifted children and believes schools should enrich education for all students [Renzulli, 1994; Renzulli & Reis, 1996]. According to his research, it is their drive that singles gifted students out from others. DeLisle [2000] does not believe that giftedness is based solely on what a person does. He claims that giftedness is based on who a person is and not on whether he or she produces anything.

The idea of intelligence for educators has been greatly altered by Howard Gardner. He is opposed to one type of
“general” intelligence. In his book, *Frames of Mind: The Theory of Multiple Intelligences* (1983), he proposes that there are many ways of being intelligent. The original book cited seven intelligences: linguistic, mathematical, kinesthetic, musical, interpersonal, intrapersonal, and spatial. Later, Gardner added the naturalistic intelligence and maintains now that he feels there are even more (Gardner, 2003). Instead of asking, “How intelligent are you?”, this research has prompted educators to ask, “How are you intelligent?” Gardner’s wife, Ellen Winner, who is a researcher at Boston College, believes that some people can be profoundly gifted in just one area. When this is the case, it might not be identified on an IQ test. She believes that giftedness is demonstrated when a person is especially precocious in one area, has a drive to master that area, and thinks in unusual ways in that area. Winner advocates that programs for gifted children include art and music in their definitions (Winner, 1996). Another well-known researcher named Barbara Clark explains that giftedness comes from the brain’s ability to integrate functions in an accelerated manner. These gifted abilities are expressed through cognition, creativity, academics, leadership, visual arts, or performing arts (Clark, 1988).

**Pulling All the Research Together**

Throughout the most recent years, research has dramatically changed the manner of thinking about gifted individuals. No single child embodies every attribute described by researchers; however, educators and parents should be aware of the ways in which giftedness can be identified (ERIC Clearinghouse on Handicapped and Gifted Children, 1990). Today, most researchers in the field recognize that there are many ways of being gifted. Intelligence is not a single quality that affects students’ abilities across every domain. For example, researchers agree that a particular student can be gifted in science, but not in math. Some might be talented in music, but