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Gifted Child Today 2013 36: 213

DOI: 10.1177/1076217513487351

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Curriculum for the Gifted

A Commitment to Excellence

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Keywords: curriculum, gifted education, integrated curriculum

Why does strong curriculum for the gifted matter so much? In a world where the knowledge explosion has created unheard of choices for what one can learn and many modalities within which one may learn, the conservation of time on learning becomes ever more important. One advantage the gifted learner has is the ability to learn more rapidly than others; yet, if this speed advantage is squandered in spending time on meaningless content, then there is no clear advantage in the learning process.

Often educators are confused about what the content of a gifted program or curriculum should be. Should it be the same as what everyone else is getting only at a faster pace? Should it be a totally different curriculum experience, based on faster mastery of the basics? Or should it be an integrated experience that weaves together different approaches, different subject areas, and different time frames for learning? These questions may be answered with the ambiguous statement: "It depends."

In an ideal world, the gifted would receive an education worthy of their mental capabilities in a comprehensive articulated manner from elementary through high school. These settings encourage the use of an integrated curriculum that allows for flexibility in the offerings at different stages of development—opportunities for mentorships and internships and service learning at secondary level, and independent and group project work at elementary levels in addition to advanced instruction in core and noncore content alike. In other words, the curriculum is an extension of the common core, a value-added set of different emphases tailored to the needs of advanced learners, and an integrated set of experiences, held together by common themes and ideas.

Several sites exist to demonstrate how this pattern of learning for the gifted may be affected. Full-time center-based programs, usually schools within schools, provide the context for such curriculum. The tradition for such centers at elementary and middle school levels have been well-established for many years and are carried out effectively in locations such as Fairfax County, Virginia; Pinellas County, Florida; and Paterson, New Jersey. At the high school level, residential schools that are state-

funded provide a value-added component in respect to a residential setting, often linked to a university or science laboratory where students may extend their studies under the tutelage of a mentor. Other day schools at this level also provide important opportunities for learning. The Hunter School in New York City is one such place as is Thomas Jefferson High School outside Washington, DC.

Yet too often such settings are not the choice of school districts, based on reasons related to the following concerns:

“WHAT A SOCIETY PROVIDES ITS BEST LEARNERS IS AN INDICATION OF ITS COMMITMENT TO EXCELLENCE, TO THE TRADITIONS OF LEARNING THAT HAVE SHAPED CIVILIZATION OVER THE CENTURIES.”

1. Gifted students need to be with others who have different intellectual and social-economic levels to understand how the world works. Therefore, grouping them consistently with other gifted learners narrows their adaptability to the real world.

In reality, the gifted thrive from being in a learning environment with others like themselves who love learning and question the way the world works. The development of talent suggests associating with others of similar aptitude and interest over time develops one's own sense of excellence.

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2. Gifted students do not need much in the way of special provisions since they can do well without such arrangements as seen in many students each year who go on to college with honors without gifted program participation.

Research suggests that many gifted learners, especially if they are poor, do not go on to higher education and beyond in appropriate careers unless they receive special opportunities and support at K-12 levels of schooling. How many more students who are gifted would do well if programs and curricula were deliberately planned for them?

3. Gifted students are not entitled to privileges not afforded to other students. In an age that recognizes the importance of nonintellective characteristics such as motivation, grit, perseverance, and resilience that contribute to success over time, why should some students at an early age be designated for special services based on aptitude only?

Readiness to learn in one or more areas is a precious characteristic that is the basis for all good curriculum planning whether a student is gifted or not. To deny the next level of learning for those who can traverse it is to stultify the educational experience in a way that promotes boredom, apathy, and frustration.

Such concerns cannot be easily allayed, however, by mere refutation. The gap in the lay public's knowledge base about gifted individuals and their needs is too great. Couple the lack of knowledge with a belief that we can narrow the achievement gap between rich and poor, minority and nonminority through doing away with special arrangements for grouping and acceleration for those students who demonstrate readiness to learn, and we have the formula for societal mediocrity on a grand scale.

What a society provides its best learners is an indication of its commitment to excellence, to the traditions of learning that have shaped civilization over the centuries. If we want to see real educational reform, then we must be willing to acknowledge the profound individual differences that exist in the gifted and do our best to develop them propitiously. If appropriately matched curriculum for our best learners is a step in the direction of the upward mobility of a society, then we should be willing to provide it. Does it matter? You bet!

Conflict of Interest

The author declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the authorship and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Bio

Joyce VanTassel-Baska, EdD, is the Jody and Layton Smith professor emerita at the College of William and Mary in Virginia where she developed a graduate program and a research and development center in gifted education. Formerly, she initiated and directed the Center for Talent Development at Northwestern University. She has also served as the state director of gifted programs for Illinois; as a regional director of a gifted service center in the Chicago area; as coordinator of gifted programs for the Toledo, Ohio, public school system; and as a teacher of gifted high school students in English and Latin. She has published widely, including 27 books and more than 500 refereed journal articles, book chapters, and scholarly reports. Her major research interests are on the talent development process and effective curricular interventions with the gifted.