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Using Gifted Education Strategies With All Students

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Why and how do teachers change their teaching practices? Each year, millions, if not billions of dollars are spent providing professional development opportunities and buying teaching resources. Many teachers sit, listen, and simply return to their classrooms to do exactly the same things that they have done for years. Administrators and curriculum specialists often plan professional development activities, but little research exists on what it takes to make substantive change in teaching practices. Our research team (Karen L. Westberg, Deborah E. Burns, E. Jean Gubbins, Sally M. Reis, Susan Dinnocenti, Carol Tieso, Sunghee Park, Linda J. Emerick, and Lori R. Maxfield) investigated not only what happens if you try to extend the pedagogy of gifted education to regular classrooms, but also, what happens when you attempt to upscale an innovation? "... {H}ow do you take an innovation—what appears to be a promising practice—and spread it more than 50 miles from the place where it originated?" (NAGC Conference Transcript, 1999, p. 7).

First, we will highlight the tasks and findings from the multi-stage quantitative and qualitative study. Second, we will provide a brief explanation of the professional development module, followed by comments from liaisons and teachers as they reflected on the training process and materials. Detailed quantitative and qualitative results will be available in the NRC/GT research monograph documenting all phases of the study.

Overview the 5-year Research Study

The multi-stage quantitative and qualitative study required many tasks, including instrument development, field tests of assessment forms, pilot studies of professional development materials, interviews, observations, and focus groups. Each task also required many steps. Highlights of tasks and key findings are outlined below:

1995-1996

Designed, implemented, and analyzed a national survey of professional development practices in gifted education. Created survey items that were examples of high quality, successful professional development practices. Analyzed national survey data from three samples: random sample of teachers across the country (n=1,231), sample of educators associated with the NRC/GT's Collaborative School Districts (n=100), and sample of purchasers of the NRC/GT videotape modules (n=205). Prepared article highlighting results of the national survey. Presented survey findings at local, national, regional, and international conferences and workshops. In general, the findings indicate that professional development opportunities in gifted education are limited in nature, degree, and scope (Westberg, et al. 1998).

Key Findings

- A very small proportion of school districts' total professional development dollars is spent on gifted education topics (4%).
- Gifted education specialists rarely provide professional development training to other faculty members within their school district.
- The majority of districts do not evaluate the impact of their professional development practices in gifted education on teachers and students.
- Peer coaching between classroom teachers and gifted education teachers is seldom (25%) or never (28%) used to provide professional development.

1996-1997

Designed, implemented (19 districts), and analyzed field-test results of four professional development modules (i.e., complete training packages) on conceptions of giftedness, curriculum modification, curriculum differentiation, and enrichment learning and teaching.

Key Findings

- Trainers evaluated the training materials as high quality.

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- Trainers requested more examples of strategies to help them with their coaching responsibilities.
- Trainers wanted samples of completed forms.
- Trainers recognized the reluctance to change teaching practices among some staff members.
- Trainers viewed administrative support as an important element to keep the focus of the innovation.

1997-1999

Redesigned the piloted professional development modules and created one, large module with all the training materials, which became known as the “BIG RED BOOK” (all but the NRC/GT videotapes and handbooks were in a 4-inch red notebook). Implemented a 2-year study of using gifted education strategies with all students in regular classrooms. Worked with over 30 school districts. Delivered training to local elementary and middle school teachers by organizing a group of local liaisons. Organized control groups within the same districts, but not in the same schools, and the control group teachers continued with their normal classroom routines. Developed multiple documentation techniques, including portfolios, anecdotal report forms, logs, and instruments. Developed instruments focusing on classroom practices, assumptions about giftedness, implementation strategies, students’ activities, and stages of implementation of the innovation. Maintained written, e-mail, and telephone communications.

Key Findings

- Liaisons successfully adopted the training materials in the four professional development modules.
- Liaisons recognized the increase in their depth and breadth of knowledge in how to modify, differentiate, and enrich curriculum.
- Teachers appreciated opportunities to discuss their curricular approaches with the liaison and other teachers.
- Liaisons requested samples of completed forms that illustrated how other teachers changed their instructional and curricular approaches.
- Liaisons needed more examples to share with teachers as they addressed specific content areas in various grade levels.

1999-2000

Analyzed all quantitative and qualitative data from the 2-year intervention study. Prepared drafts of chapters for the technical monograph. Redesigned the professional development module based on the intervention study.

Key Findings

- Liaisons successfully used the NRC/GT professional development module with local teachers.
- Liaisons became local experts as a result of their knowledge and experiences with modifying, differentiating, and enriching curriculum.
- Liaisons recognized the need to differentiate training for local teachers. Just as the students were not all at the same level of expertise, neither were the teachers who agreed to participate in the intervention study.
- Teachers learned how to enhance or change some of their instructional and curricular strategies. Not all teachers were as successful with the strategies. Some persevered; others did not continue as participants.
- Teachers benefited from the long-term nature of the study.
- The learning curve for teachers and liaisons varied.
- Teachers responded positively to the strategies as they reflected on the positive responses of their students.
- Teachers and liaisons who were supported by their administrative teams found it easier to support the implementation of an innovation.
- Experimental group teachers changed their classroom practices, as compared to control group teachers.
- Students who worked with experimental group teachers reported positive changes in their class activities.
- Teachers raised their level of expectations for student work. They recognized that students were ready for challenging work.
- Change “hurts.” It is a realization that what you are comfortable with may not be the best approach for you as a teacher or for your students.

The Module as a Training Program

We prepared a professional development module, consisting of background information on the NRC/GT, and we shared research findings from previous studies focusing on instructional and curriculum practices in regular classrooms. We developed over 85 transparencies with accompanying scripts. Four topics were introduced: conceptions of giftedness, curriculum modification, curriculum differentiation, and enrichment teaching and learning. In addition, each liaison received NRC/GT videotapes, handbooks, and articles that extended discussions on the topics.

We invited elementary and middle school teachers of the gifted and classroom teachers from over 30 districts to serve as liaisons. As they prepared for the training of local

teachers, liaisons studied the professional development module described above. In essence, two interventions were occurring: training of liaisons and training of teachers who, in turn, worked with their students.

Liaisons as Trainers

Liaisons assumed a huge responsibility as local trainers. Even if they viewed themselves as minimally or highly experienced, they immediately recognized that they needed to review and study all materials intensively. One liaison said:

I panicked We were in an unusual situation because I think all the other districts had one person, and ours—there were two, and that’s another story. So, we did have the luxury of having each other, and we planned a time to sit down and go through the book, and we thought, “Oh, a couple of hours we’ll get through it.” After four hours, we decided we were going to have to meet again, and I think again and again. I think we met many hours trying to get ready. . . . (NAGC Conference Transcript, 1999, pp. 39-40)

The professional background of the liaisons varied. Some were quite familiar with identification, programming, and curriculum models in our field through formal coursework and years of experiences; others were self-taught and eager to learn more. One experienced liaison commented:

I found that while we went into this very willing and ended it very willingly, . . . it was a learning curve for me, as well as for the participants. Having been in the field for quite awhile, I thought I knew everything in terms of the strategies. . . . But {not} actually delivering it in that kind of format. The materials in the book were rich. We now use them all the time with other training models and training sessions that we do in our school system. And so, the material was wonderful, but there was a lot of it I had to sit down and pour through the material, and organize it in a way that I thought was clear for the people on the receiving end. Because I believe teachers can be some of the hardest audience, you know. And so, I didn’t feel comfortable getting up in front of the group unless I felt I really knew that material. (NAGC Conference Transcript, 1999, pp. 38-39)

Curriculum: Activities or Events

We knew from our earlier NRC/GT studies and the research conducted by others in the field of gifted and talented education that the academic needs of young people were not the cornerstone of planning and implementing curriculum. Oftentimes a series of activities or a collection of discrete skills served as lessons. One liaison shared the following reflection about what goes on in elementary schools:

You are probably familiar with teachers who have units on the apple, watermelon, and the pumpkin. Do you know what I’m talking about? My biggest challenge was with the group of first grade teachers who . . . had their training in the spring, were determined they weren’t really going to do any implementation until fall because you can’t start anything new until you think about it over the summer, and start in September, okay? So, that was their mindset. They couldn’t change direction in the middle of the year, or so they perceived. And so, when I went to work with the first grade teachers, their big overall unit of which they {included} everything—math, science, social studies, reading—revolved around the watermelon in September, and pumpkin in October and [apple in] November. And I’m not lying. It’s a stretch of the imagination even to think it, but that’s what it was. And so, I spent a lot of time meeting with . . . teachers. {The gifted teacher and I} were trying to get them to look at . . . big ideas. . . . {I}t was a real struggle for them. That was a whole new way of thinking. {The teachers needed to look} at modifying “their idea of curriculum.” (NAGC Conference Transcript, 1999, p. 49)

When you think about how some teachers might approach their curricula, you understand how the notion of holidays, activities, worksheets, workbooks, and educational games can fill the hours of the school day. We needed to break down this mindset in some cases. In other cases, we needed to provide the rationale for upscaling the curriculum and include enough examples of how-to-do it; and in still other cases we just needed to help teachers critique the quality of their available instructional resources and develop high-quality alternatives. Therefore, professional development was the focus of our research. As noted in *National Excellence: A Case for Developing America’s Talent*:

Teachers must receive better training in how to teach high-level curricula. They need support for providing instruction that challenges all students sufficiently. This will benefit not only students with outstanding talent but children at every academic level. (United States Department of Education, 1993, p. 3)

Curriculum: Critique and Creation

Liaisons were responsible for demonstrating a series of strategies often associated with the gifted education literature. Of course, these strategies did not necessarily originate in our field, but they have become part of the parlance for explaining why students need curricular options to really meet their needs and challenge their talents and abilities. We asked liaisons to help teachers focus on questions such as the following for modifying, differentiating, and enriching the curriculum:

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Curriculum Modification

What is the quality of the curriculum? Does it focus on big ideas or concepts? Is it repetitious?

Curriculum Differentiation

What are the academic needs of your students?

How can you create or adapt curriculum opportunities to meet these needs?

Enrichment Learning and Teaching

What do students already know? How can you use formal and informal assessment techniques to assess their knowledge and compact the curriculum? What types of replacement strategies are appropriate for students who have mastered the curriculum? How can you accelerate the content? How can you extend and enrich the curriculum?

Assessing Classroom Practices

Assessing classroom practices at a distance was quite a challenge. Paper instruments were the proxies for our “presence” in classrooms near and far. Since we could not and did not want to be on-site to observe and shape the intervention, we developed a wide variety of instruments that would hopefully elicit critical details, documenting the implementation process. Our eyes and ears were the liaisons and teachers. Of course, we used additional data collection techniques to ensure that we captured as much information as possible, including frequent updates via phone calls, anecdotal reports, informal discussions at conferences and workshops, lesson plans, student products, and selected site visits towards the end of the intervention. Collectively, all of these data provided the “observation window” of the extent to which the pedagogy of gifted education can be used with all students.

Teacher Change

Analyzing the quality of their own teaching was critical to change and growth. It was important to ask questions such as: What do I do well? What needs to be improved? How do I improve my teaching ability? Obviously, teaching is both an art and a science. Sometimes teachers were overwhelmed with the new content and strategies, new models of teaching, or new assessment techniques. Metacognitive strategies that promoted reflection on teaching helped teachers understand the need for change. One liaison offered an explanation of the difference between the before and after of using the “BIG RED BOOK”:

This is just a general before and after kind of a question with the teachers I worked with, but I think in general what you talked about—the big idea—understanding—they realized when they started to look at what they were teaching and how they were teaching and how they were going to change it for whatever method they had chosen—they had to reflect upon what it was they were

teaching, and why they were teaching it. And I think that was a big before and after. I think they learned through that process that sometimes they were doing things that didn’t have a great purpose or a great understanding behind it. And that creates that self-reflection, I think that was the biggest before and after overall. (NAGC Conference Transcript, 1999, pp. 49-50)

“Some people have changed a little and some people have made a sea of change” (Emerick, 1999). Individuals involved in the innovation determined the extent of change. So many personal, motivational, and attitudinal variables affect the extent of their own change process. While admitting that the implementation process was “exhausting” and “too much,”

two {teachers} stated emphatically that “the real difference . . . is looking at student work and seeing what students are getting out of it.” One stated, “I’m really trying to work with different things. I’ve used things that I’ve developed . . . so I’m using those ideas and I’m broadening {them}, too . . .” (Emerick, 1999, p. 3)

Another teacher confirmed that she changed her approach to teaching. “I also have done lessons on goals, reaching goals, and what are goals, and how . . . obstacles get in the way of accomplishing goals” (NAGC Conference Transcript, 1999, p. 52). Projects, as a way of documenting what students have learned, have also changed—no more word searches, fill-in-the-blanks, or worksheets. Students were now engaged in hands-on activities that challenge their knowledge and increase the expectations for truly understanding and using new content and skills.

Teachers recognized that students became more independent as learners, as they acquired skills of search and techniques for posing questions and finding answers. One liaison offered the following comment about the students:

As far as [the] students, it’s made them become much more independent as learners, and it’s given {them} many more choices. And what we expect the students to do to use higher level thinking skills, and make decisions—really the study teaches us to do the very same thinking. It’s been quite an intellectual exercise for the teachers. (NAGC Conference Transcript, 1999, pp. 53-54)

One teacher devised a “mantra of change” by reviewing what she learned throughout the study and listing the types of strategies that would now be her approach to extending gifted education strategies to all students:

- I will continue to pretest and activate background knowledge before the start of every unit.
- I will continue to assess my students' interests as well as knowledge level.
- I will continue to assess my lessons for the following:
Do products assignments differ. . .? Do my work groups offer flexibility. . .? Do my students feel challenged by the material presented?
- I will continue to discuss, debate, gather differentiation ideas with co-workers. (Teacher #535)
(Dinnocenti, 2001)

This study of gifted education strategies yielded a considerable amount of knowledge. For this article, we chose to share some comments from liaisons and teachers because they were the key people in the intervention. As a group, they once again confirmed the tenet that change is a process that requires support, reflection, and human and material resources. It also requires an element that is not always obvious at first. Students' reactions to the innovation served as very strong motivators to stay with the change process.

New Center for the Psychology of Abilities, Competencies, and Expertise (PACE Center) Announced by Yale University

Traditionally, "abilities" and "expertise" have been viewed as separate and largely distinct constructs and research areas within the broader field of psychology. In this traditional view, the psychology of abilities studies people's largely innate capabilities and the psychology of expertise studies the development and structure of people's mastery of skills. A new Center has opened at Yale dedicated to the idea that these two areas of psychology are inextricably intertwined and that abilities represent a form of developing expertise. According to this idea, abilities are always assessed through tests of some kind of expertise (e.g., in solving analytical-reasoning problems); expertise, in turn, always depends in part upon abilities, including cognitive ones (e.g., analytical skills) as well as motivational ones (e.g., ability to practice in a focused and deliberate way) and even affective ones (e.g., emotional intelligence). Competencies, in turn, are realized abilities on their way toward the further development of expertise.

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The Yale Center for the Psychology of Abilities, Competencies, and Expertise currently comprises a group of about two dozen researchers (including teaching and research faculty, research scientists, postdoctoral fellows, and graduate students) investigating various aspects of abilities, competencies, and expertise. It is physically located at 340 Edwards Street in New Haven, Connecticut. Its Director is Robert J. Sternberg, IBM Professor of Psychology and Education at Yale; the Deputy Director is Elena L. Grigorenko, Research Scientist in the Psychology Department and Child Study Center at Yale (and also Associate Professor of Psychology at Moscow State University); and the Assistant Director is Linda Jarvin, Associate Research Scientist in Psychology at Yale. The Center is a part of the Department of Psychology and is associated with a new graduate program in the Psychology Department at Yale in Abilities and Expertise, with which almost half of the psychology faculty is affiliated.

The Center currently has about \$7 million in grants and contracts from the National Science Foundation, U.S. Office of Educational Research and Improvement, U.S. Army Research Institute, and W. T. Grant Foundation. Current projects include, among others, studying (a) effective ways of exploiting the link between abilities and expertise in teaching and assessment; (b) how the nature of abilities and expertise changes over the life span and how the two constructs differ among groups; (c) leadership development; and (d) the nature of wisdom and how effectively to teach for it. The web page for the Center is www.yale.edu/pace and inquiries can be addressed to robert.sternberg@yale.edu.

Suicide Among Gifted Adolescents: How to Prevent It

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The rate of suicide among children 10 to 14 years of age increased 100% between 1980-1996. Among youngsters 15-19 years of age, the rate of increase was 114%, making suicide the fourth leading cause of death for this age group (U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, 1999). While suicide rates among adults have steadied or declined over the past few decades, suicide rates of young people have increased (*Teenage Suicide*, 2000a). The literature has reported affective states, environmental conditions, and interpersonal problems as suicide risk factors (Blatt, 1995; Dixon & Scheckel, 1996; Hayes & Sloat, 1990). Although literature on the relationship between suicide and giftedness is scarce, as are the statistics involving suicide rates among gifted adolescents, characteristics often associated with gifted and talented young people are also viewed as suicide risk factors (Dixon & Scheckel, 1996).

The most salient characteristics of gifted adolescents that may be associated with vulnerability to social and emotional disturbances are: (a) perfectionism, (b) supersensitivity, (c) social isolation, and (d) sensory overexcitability (Delisle, 1986; Dixon & Scheckel, 1996; Fleith, 1998; Hayes & Sloat, 1989). Driven by a self-oriented or socially prescribed perfectionism, the individual establishes high and rigid standards. To do the best is no longer enough and the individual feels frustrated no matter how well he/she performs (Lajoie & Shore, 1981). Excessive concern about errors, in addition to high parental and societal expectations, can result in depression and absence of self-worth. Many gifted youngsters believe they are loved for their grades, honors, and special abilities. As a result, they do not allow themselves to fail or make a mistake. "The shame and guilt of 'failure' can lead them to suicide" (Nelson & Galas, 1994, p. 47).

In the school environment, attention has been paid to raising standards and testing students. Academic success and cognitive development have been the focus of educational goals, especially for gifted students. Students may feel the pressure to succeed. However, the emotional and social development of these youngsters has been neglected by the school. As explained by Pollack (*Teenage Suicide*, 2000b), "you cannot separate out students' emotional report card from their academic report card" (p. 22).

Supersensitivity may be associated with gifted students' heightened awareness about world problems and their

feelings of frustration and powerlessness about making changes that can affect the world. Feelings of being abnormal or experiencing rejection from peers can lead the talented adolescent to experience severe identity problems. Finally, gifted adolescents who present traits of sensory overexcitability such as high energy levels, emotional intensity, unusual capacity to care, and insatiable love of learning may not find a receptive environment. The lack of support from family, peers, and teachers may also contribute to self-concept problems (Lovecky, 1993). When one or more of these issues occur, potential problems emerge. Gifted adolescents' inability to deal with complex and intense feelings may be a source of vulnerability that can contribute to suicidal thoughts.

Parents and teachers must recognize warning signals of suicide risk to successfully intervene. It is not merely because the adolescent is gifted that he/she is immune to emotional distress. According to Nelson and Galas (1994), some of the signals are:

- Suicide threats: Adolescents may either directly or indirectly tell others that they plan to commit suicide (e.g., "I have decided to kill myself," "I wish I were dead," "I just cannot go on any longer," "I am getting out; I am tired of life").
- Sudden changes in behavior: Adolescents may begin to perform poorly in school, skip school, stop caring about how they look, lose interest in the things they used to love, sleep more than usual, stay out late for no reason, or present sudden weight changes.
- Withdrawal from friends: Adolescents may prefer to stay in their rooms and not socialize with others.
- Giving away treasured possessions: A suicidal adolescent may pass along his/her favorite items saying he/she will not need them anymore.
- Tying up loose ends: Adolescents may present a sudden desire to take care of details such as answering a letter that is overdue, or returning something he/she has borrowed.
- Poor self-esteem: Adolescents can feel they are not capable of doing things (e.g., "I cannot do anything right," "I am stupid"), they perceive themselves as worthless and unlovable, or they stop getting involved in activities. This behavior is associated with lack of enthusiasm, low energy, and lack of motivation.
- Increased irritability: Adolescents who want to commit suicide may present aggression, rebellion, and disobedient behaviors towards parents, friends, and teachers. These sudden outbursts are unusual and surprising and may isolate the student from others.

- Self-destructive behavior: Suicidal youngsters may act as if they are trying to hurt themselves (e.g., driving cars or bikes recklessly, carrying a gun, smoking and drinking heavily, developing anorexia nervosa or bulimia). “Autopsies of adolescent suicide victims show that one-third to one-half of the teenagers were under the influence of drugs or alcohol shortly before they killed themselves, according to HHS statistics” (*Teenage Suicide*, 2000a, p. 25).
- Develop self-acceptance and recognition of their limitations (Silverman, 1993b).
- Reframe the notion of a mistake as a learning experience (Silverman, 1993b).
- Develop problem-solving and communication skills (Silverman, 1993b).
- Challenge the idea that suicide is an honorable solution (Cross, Cook, & Dixon, 1996).
- Deal with tense situations with humor (Webb, Meckstroth, & Tolan, 1983).
- Identify the sources of stress (Nelson & Galas, 1994).

Recommendations

It is difficult to develop a plan to prevent suicide without considering the role of family, school, peers, and community.

Parents should assist gifted children:

- Provide mutual trust and approval (Silverman, 1993a).
- Support children’s interests (Silverman, 1993a).
- Value creative and intellectual efforts (Silverman, 1993a).
- Provide quality time and communication (Silverman, 1993a).
- Respond to children’s needs (Silverman, 1993a).
- Reconcile their demands with their children’s aspirations (Silverman, 1993a).
- Acquire more information about adolescent suicide (Nelson & Galas, 1994).
- Become involved in finding solutions to the suicide problem (Nelson & Galas, 1994).

The school environment can contribute to suicide prevention:

- Fulfill the needs of gifted and talented students.
- Schedule individual and group counseling as a part of the educational gifted curriculum (Farrel, 1989).
- Provide training on suicide prevention to school personnel (from bus drivers to custodians to teachers) to help them recognize behavioral clues that a student is at risk (Delisle, 1990; *Teenage Suicide*, 2000b). Teachers should also read students’ essays attentively. Many of them may contain references to suicidal thoughts.
- Provide resources on suicide prevention to school staff (Delisle, 1990).
- Provide training on suicide prevention to students who may act like peer helpers (Nelson & Galas, 1994).

The school should also provide opportunities to gifted students:

- Learn how to set priorities and avoid overcommitting themselves (Silverman, 1993b).
- Understand their strengths and weaknesses (Silverman, 1993b).

The school should also:

- Create an environment where students feel comfortable talking about their difficulties. Male students are not usually encouraged to talk about emotions so they are guided toward physical outlets. According to the U.S. Department of Education (*Teenage Suicide*, 2000a), “teenage girls attempt suicide three times as often as boys do, but males are four times more likely to finish the job” (p. 22).
- Create an environment where students are encouraged to dream and use their imagination.
- Implement activities that nurture and highlight students’ interests, strengths, and abilities.

Community resources such as libraries, as well as working with professionals and mentors can provide an important cognitive and emotional support for the gifted adolescent (Fleith, 1998).

Conclusions

Educators and parents must turn their attention to the emotional and social needs of gifted and talented youngsters. It is important to remember that some youngsters may be at risk. According to the American Association of Suicidology, it is urgent to promote and create conditions (in the family, school environment, and community) that will nurture cognitive and affective needs of young people. As Boldt wrote: “Human dignity is rooted in a good life, a sense of community, a positive self-worth, and so on. We promote human dignity when we provide these life conditions” (1989, p. 7).

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depts.washington.edu/ysp

The Emotional Journey of the Gifted and Talented Adolescent Female

Suzanne Blakeley

Sarah rolled her eyes then laughed as half a dozen waiters gathered around the table to sing “Happy Birthday.” Turning 16, our daughter recently celebrated a rite of passage that will soon bring car keys, added responsibilities, and long-awaited freedoms. It was a bittersweet moment for me: Sarah was still healing from an intense, yet brief depression, she battled during ninth grade.

At 14, our daughter lost a hard fought struggle. Her slow descent into depression began during fourth grade after our family’s relocation to the East. Once self-confident and happy, she became filled with anxiety and frustration by the end of middle school. In ninth grade Sarah was haunted by rapid thoughts, and sleepless nights. Her tremendous mental energies eventually spiraled inward, settling into a looping, repetitive chant: I’m unacceptable.

“What is happening? Why me?” she cried. Nearly three decades ago, I asked myself these same questions when I suffered from a similar depression. I had hoped my own experience would spare my child such pain. Devastated, I assured Sarah that in time she would discover the answers to her questions.

The One Who Seems to Need the Least, Often Needs the Most

We notified the high school of her emotional difficulties and her teachers were surprised: Sarah had always been gregarious and maintained high marks. At home, however, she shed the mask she wore each day to school. Exhausted, she hurled angry looks and disrespectful comments toward family members before withdrawing to her room.

Sarah’s depression was quite a storm that affected the entire family: her older sister was worried, patient and understanding; her father, identified as gifted in the late 1950s, began to speak openly about his own feelings of being misunderstood and “differentness.” I felt alone, unaware of the wealth of available support and resources. Sarah’s difficulties brought for me a deeper understanding of why special assistance is so essential for the gifted to achieve intellectual potential and the acceptance each requires and deserves.

Thankfully, her recovery was amazingly swift. Therefore, I share Sarah’s story and our parental successes, failings, and revelations in the spirit of helping others. Sometimes

courageous young women attending traditional public and private schools today “fall through the cracks.”

Factoring in Past Life Experiences

Upon relocating, Sarah’s father and I were delighted to find a community in proximity to a major metropolitan area, a school district that followed a similar curriculum, and a home within a neighborhood setting. Sarah—an extrovert and risk-taker born with an easy temperament—accepted the move as another one of life’s great adventures, since past moves had brought positive experiences.

Her formative years were spent in large, homogeneous suburban districts located in the Midwest. Coursework was differentiated within the classroom to provide challenge based upon her individual learning style, abilities, and interest (Schoolwide Enrichment Model). Sarah advanced as far as she was capable, while avoiding much of the “differentness” that pullout programs or tracking often create among peers.

Teaching complemented Sarah’s visual, hands-on, inductive learning style; she accepted the repetition of skills required to master certain materials without hesitation. Interdisciplinary activities allowed Sarah to work with peers of varying ages; her older sister also increased her opportunities, allowing even greater autonomy at a young age.

The district was responsive and well-funded with a strong infrastructure. Academic assessment was ongoing, and curriculum and conduct policies were well-developed and consistently followed. “Character Counts” and “Kindness is Contagious” programs ensured respectful interactions among peers and staff.

At an early age, Sarah understood that her action, inaction, or reaction to presented experiences were under her control. She learned how her voice and personal choices impacted her and those around her, further reinforcing independent development of positive life strategies. She flourished academically and personally.

Our parenting style closely parallels this type of educational environment. My husband and I share a strong bond based upon common values and similar intellect, and we continue a family tradition of open expression and respect. Our approach is individualized and authoritative with “directives” seldom issued. With praise and physical affection, we acknowledge good personal choices that dwell within guidelines set by a blend of Christian and Classical Western philosophies. Independent thought is stressed along with the right to personal expression, as long as it does not harm others.

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We facilitate the learning process. Sarah moves freely beneath our guidelines to make personal decisions based upon her abilities and past choices. She is allowed to experience the natural consequences for inappropriate actions, which is often the most difficult part of parenting. We step in only when a choice or action may cause irreparable harm.

This type of parenting and Sarah's differentiated schooling promoted her exceptional problem-solving abilities, which enhanced her independence and self-discipline. During adolescence, her past experiences and our philosophy also created the fertile ground for plenty of "intellectual debate" as it invites questioning.

The Extroverted Gifted and Talented Adolescent Is Often a Lonely Profile

Bright and creative, Sarah's grades have always been excellent in all disciplines. Her talents literally exploded during middle school. One year she focused on mathematics, then the next year it would be language arts and music. This pattern continues into high school. Our daughter possesses the well-documented gifted intellectual and personality characteristics. Among other traits, her sensitivity, empathy, and drive to understand were heightened at 8 years old.

Sarah "stuck out" during middle school, physically maturing at 11. She was socially more mature and a full head taller than the majority of her peers. She was smart and "different" during a period when peer pressure mounts, and academics often take a back seat to socialization. Highly articulate, she also resolved peer conflict in an adult manner.

Considering Sarah's capabilities and innate strong sense of self, I recognized long ago that we must avoid treading upon her emerging independence: we must provide assistance without overprotection. She lacked life experience and her emotional maturity was not yet fully synchronized with her advanced intellectual and social development. This created difficulties when parenting her in a diverse world filled with "Instant Messaging," peer violence, and mixed media messages.

Our child allowed me a peek into her thinking during various stages of growth; poignant statements popped out unexpectedly while she accompanied me on errands, when I washed dishes, or at her bedtime (see box on the next page). During our mutual exploration of her thoughts, my daughter's personal choices assured me she was developing strategies and choosing appropriate activities to positively channel and balance her strengths.

Sarah voiced several concerns beginning in fourth grade: her dismay with an environment that lacked the opportunities she required for intellectual and personal growth; the uncivil and inconsistent behaviors of adults and peers; and the increasing lack of connection from peers.

A Shattered Idealism: Things Are Not the Way They Ought to Be

By the time Sarah entered middle school, district leadership was changing and the schools were in transition, struggling with increased State mandates, rising costs, and a lack of community funding. Sarah and we had minimal success with efforts to meet her needs. We were unable to move and Sarah chose not to go to a private school, due to the boarding requirement.

Sarah's friends began to choose different paths by the end of middle school. She tried to "blend in" by trying on different personas, and then she sought diversity on purpose in an attempt to bring attention to her right to individuality. Minimal extracurricular activities were available to promote new friendships and a sense of belonging within the school community.

Our daughter had instinctively pulled away from us and grown closer to her sister—four and a half years older—with whom she shared family values, past experiences, and meaningful conversation. She found acceptance and safety within the relationship.

Sarah was still optimistic the high school would open up opportunities. She practiced the entire summer for team try-outs since sports historically provided well-organized activities for friendships in the district. A few months into her freshman year, she found courses unchallenging and her peers now adjusting to newly acquired freedoms. She was constantly hazed and humiliated by older team players, and her involvement in a church group and a school club proved "pointless" as both were disorganized with no apparent goals. Sarah's sister also had left home to start her first year in college.

The impact of her repeated effort to reach out resulted in negative, not rewarding experiences. Sarah fought fiercely for a sense of belonging, and without the daily support of her sister, her anxiety and frustration increased. She became increasingly withdrawn and we sought help; I felt the potential for suicide was real and that she should be professionally monitored. I deliberately chose a woman therapist who was soft-spoken and gentle, since Sarah did not respond well to abrupt adults. I shared my despair with a good friend of mine; I had a good cry.

"I feel like a fly on the wall," Sarah stated. Restricted thinking, an unresponsive environment, and social isolation

had taken its toll. Under the circumstances, I believed depression was inevitable.

A Word on Professional Assistance

At the time Sarah entered therapy she still respectfully vocalized the inconsistencies she observed: among family members, our parenting versus the parenting of her friends, peer interactions, as well as teachers' methods of instruction.

The therapist felt strongly that due to Sarah's expressiveness and maturity, though only 14, she should be seen alone without a parent present. Communication regarding our daughter's progress and the manner in which issues were addressed was spotty at best. Before long, our daughter became increasingly inexpressive and hostile at home. She scrutinized and criticized family members and loudly resisted authority. Her frustration and impulsivity increased when there was conflict with peers at school or she did not get her way at home.

The headway we made at home appeared undone after each visit with the therapist. I finally realized that reflective, talk therapy served to only further increase our daughter's anxiety and frustration. We ended sessions after Sarah made a series of poor personal choices within one week and had little idea why. Upon parting, the therapist said she had empowered Sarah too much. We believe she had unintentionally enabled Sarah's negative behaviors, diminishing our authority and her emotional bond with family members. Much later I asked my daughter if the therapy had helped her and she replied "No."

I prefer an educational approach; Sarah was seeking solutions. We stepped up our efforts, continuing to draw upon her amazing problem-solving abilities. Pleasant past experiences and a close family provided her with resiliency, which was key to her recovery.

My greatest fear was that resulting negative behaviors might be carried into adulthood: namely, resistance to authority,

conflict avoidance, a lack of awareness of her impact on others, and withdrawal under stress. She had built a "bubble" around herself—insulating her expressiveness, sensitivity, and warmth—as protection against the teasing, rejection, and overall unresponsiveness of the environment.

"The Art of Listening"

Sarah's short statements were often the most revealing of her inner turmoil and unmet needs. Self-discovery and growth are solitary and often painful processes, and they take great patience on the part of the parent. We allowed these statements and others to guide us in assisting her on her timetable, preserving her independence.

"Why do people speak to each other so harshly?"

"The teacher is always screaming."

"Can you give me extra spelling words?"

1994, 4th grade

"Mom, for some reason I don't seem to be connecting with the kids at school."

1996, 7th grade

"I often 'dip down' so I can have friends."

"I feel so controlled; this school feels like a prison."

"There is no respect for individuality."

1998, end of 8th grade

"I'm struggling. I feel like I'm suffocating."

"Grandpa, I think the high school will open up more opportunities for me."

Summer 1999, upon entrance to 9th grade

"How would you feel if all you did was deal with clueless kids all day long?"

"I think one way, but I feel another way."

"I surround myself with a bubble."

"I'm not making good choices for myself lately."

"My strengths are a curse."

1999, 9th grade

"This is the first year I have ever felt challenged at school."

"The kids don't have the same experiences that I have. Where are all the kids like me?"

"It's hard, I'm lonely, but it is better to be who I am."

"Thank you for sticking by me and helping me be the best I can be."

2000, 10th grade

Growth Takes Great Patience

Sarah's depression, like mine, occurred when she was in a situation beyond her control where there was no apparent solution or escape. She and I both share a strong sense of self, an easy temperament, and are capable of handling many tasks at one time. Our "go with the flow" temperament along with great empathy made each of us susceptible to

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depression. The warning signals that indicate when well-being is threatened are often ignored or suppressed.

I personally avoided a depression by transferring to a private high school that met my needs; however, the “inevitable” arrived with a brief depressive episode in my early twenties, never to be repeated. Sarah was aware of this. “I might as well learn now,” she stated.

To begin, we assisted our daughter with recognizing signals and discovering positive ways to temper her sensitivity so she did not have to surround herself with a “bubble.” Her initial efforts were rewarding, opening the door once more for independent development of additional positive strategies. We assisted her with identification of gifts and balancing her strengths so they did not become weaknesses. Current district leadership has also permitted flexibility in her coursework to ensure intellectual stimulation, and implemented initiatives within the school to promote a respectful learning environment. I feel confident future depression for Sarah is highly unlikely.

Parental Involvement: Assisting Sarah in Discovering “Why”

Reducing anxiety and stress:

- A required 2-week period of reflection to diminish the bombardment of incoming information and inconsistencies. This brought the structure and quiet needed to rejuvenate and clarify thinking. Reintroduction of stimuli was gradual in order for Sarah to learn how to compartmentalize information. Academics were a lifeline and “de-schooling” would have been detrimental. She attended school, but we limited peer contact to 30 minutes on the phone, and no Internet except for school projects. Interestingly, she did not use the phone nor did she use the computer.
- During anxious and inexpressive periods, I maintained contact through physical touch—backrubs, hugs, etc.—allowing my daughter to initiate any conversation. Sometimes it became hard for me not to initiate conversation, but I did my best.
- Once de-stressed, she was asked to think about those things in all areas of her life that did not appear to be working for her.

Recognizing signals for emotional self-regulation:

- Sarah admitted she often ignored her intuition. We worked on listening to “gut feel” as it is an early warning sign of possible “flooding” as well as those situations academically or emotionally that could potentially create frustration or anxiety. Warning signs are indications that well-being could potentially be threatened.

- The “red flag alert.” When Sarah appeared disorganized or emotional, I pointed this out as a warning sign that required an “attitude adjustment” (self-adjustment to her reaction) or that she needed to kick in her problem-solving abilities to create options. Verbal expression and sharing a concern was encouraged, but to preserve her independence Sarah had the freedom to privately weigh possible factors and make that decision for herself. She now calls her own “red flag alert” and asks for our assistance only when she is unsuccessful in resolving something on her own.
- Right to privacy was maintained.
- We promoted sensible exercise and healthy eating habits.
- I suggested ways to alleviate stress, but allowed Sarah to discover the methods that worked best for her: favorites included quiet time or a nap, music, reading, a warm bath, backrubs. She requires solitude each day.

Finding a passion:

- As she had withdrawn from activities, we required that Sarah choose one activity of interest to pursue. Her first activity was rather solitary: music lessons. After a few months she switched to horseback riding, and has since found camaraderie with others who share her love of the sport.
- Sarah expressed mathematics was important to her, so we located a mentor—a successful gifted woman—who takes her beyond classroom work. They have a healthy bond that is rewarding for each.

Identifying gifts:

- Intellectual and personality characteristics are called “strengths,” not gifts. Her strengths were often misunderstood and perceived as weaknesses by educators less secure in their teaching or staff lacking knowledge of GT characteristics. Also, those outside the family were often too demanding and very hard on our daughter due to her advanced abilities. I asked my daughter for an assessment and politely reminded instructors of her age if she felt they were too demanding.
- I used expressions from literature that indicated what Sarah experienced was not uncommon for creative, bright individuals. One of my favorite expressions is Goethe’s “Everything in moderation,” and several passages found in *Letters to a Young Poet* by Rainer Maria Rilke, which I read to her.
- Sarah reads books focused on the motivation behind an individual’s behavior.

- We respectfully pointed out those individuals, family members and extended family who appeared to manage their strengths successfully and unsuccessfully to assist with self-identification and balance.
- We share with Sarah the difficulties our strengths created for us growing up and the resulting behavior patterns we struggle with as adults.

Learning to grab the riches and manage conflict:

- We used daily experiences, positive and negative, to brainstorm and practice problem-solving. We suggested the selective use of humor on occasion to defuse a tense situation.
- Sarah began to feel less restricted by looking at various options, regaining a sense of control over her life. Finding options in a restrictive environment is challenging, but can be done with parental assistance.
- Discussions surrounding her choices that might be considered “bad judgment” focused instead on “good choices based upon fulfilling those needs she deemed important.”
- It has been a tremendous help that new district leadership is validating and systematically addressing many of the concerns Sarah voiced over the years. We openly discuss the limitations of the school and the community, but focus on the positive improvements we each observe.
- Sarah is accepting and working within limitations, and has become involved in a task force created to promote respect, and recognize student and staff achievements within her school. She is positively channeling her strengths, particularly her great empathy for others, through volunteerism.

Accepting strengths:

- Self-acceptance is evident when laughter and well-being returns.

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Author's Note

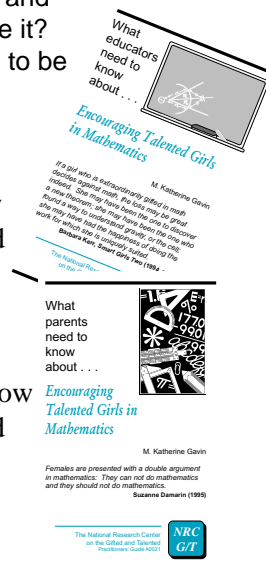
I would like to thank Gail Larsen for her support and compassion as we talked about talents and gifts of our daughters.

3 Practitioners' Guides New from the NRC/GT

Why is there a gender gap in science and technology and how can we reduce it? How can we empower gifted girls to be more confident in mathematics? Find out more from our Practitioners' Guides on mathematics.

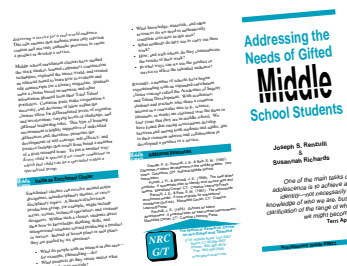
What Parents Need to Know About Encouraging Talented Girls in Mathematics
M. Katherine Gavin
Order No. A0021

What Educators Need to Know About Encouraging Talented Girls in Mathematics
M. Katherine Gavin
Order No. A0022



How can middle schools adopt the Schoolwide Enrichment Model (SEM) to infuse a broad range of highly challenging learning experiences into their programs? Find out more from this Practitioners' Guide.

Addressing the Needs of Gifted Middle School Students
Joseph S. Renzulli & Susannah Richards
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Extending Gifted Education Pedagogy to the Regular Classroom

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The mission of The National Research Center on the Gifted and Talented (NRC/GT) is to plan and conduct a program of high quality research that is theory-driven, problem-based, practice-relevant, and consumer-oriented. An examination of professional development practices in gifted education is a component of the mission of the NRC/GT. A recently completed study, *Extending Gifted Education Pedagogy to the Regular Classroom*, was designed to investigate the impact of various professional development activities on educators' practices. Districts involved in the study had to provide a local liaison who had gifted and talented responsibilities and at least five teachers within one building who would agree to participate in the study for 2 years. The teachers had to implement at least one new differentiation practice in their classrooms and provide requested documentation. Over 30 school districts throughout the United States were selected to participate.

development module on modification, differentiation, and enrichment strategies to the teachers during a 5-hour workshop. That day the teachers developed an understanding of the research questions and received extensive information about the strategies from which they could choose. The group considered what available strategies they already had in their classrooms and selected the new strategy they wanted to add to their repertoire of resources. They attempted to identify what support they would need to implement the strategy.

The five teachers decided to work on the same strategy, a differentiation strategy that would provide alternative activities for the students in their classes. They appeared to have two reasons for choosing the same strategy. They could support each other in their efforts and the strategy seemed needed throughout their curriculum.

For the time of the study, the entire group met at least once a month for an hour or more to continue training on identified areas of interest or need in relation to the study. The meetings made use of the many training materials provided by the NRC/GT, as well as the various materials developed by Carol Ann Tomlinson for the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development (ASCD).

Additionally, the teachers met informally to discuss aspects of their work either among themselves or with the liaison.

Teachers were introduced to each of the following strategies in the study:

1. **Modification**—using an existing curriculum unit
2. **Differentiation**—using open-ended activities
3. **Differentiation**—using alternative activities
4. **Differentiation**—using tiered activities
5. **Enrichment**—using curriculum compacting and interest-based curriculum activities for some students
6. **Enrichment**—using the Enrichment Triad Model in the classroom for all students

The School District of Upper Dublin, located in a suburban area northwest of Philadelphia, was involved in the study. The gifted support supervisor acted as the liaison and trainer for five middle school teachers. The teachers' class assignments included two regular classroom teachers, two learning support teachers, and one gifted support teacher. In February 1998, the liaison presented a professional

The liaison also went into several classrooms and observed the students or helped the teacher with an activity.

The teachers recognized early in the first year that although they had selected one strategy for the study, they needed the other strategies as well. Before long they were working on modifying units and trying other ways of differentiating. As

Curriculum Modification...

involves the analysis, evaluation, and improvement of existing curriculum units and lesson plans. Modified units increase challenge, authenticity, and active learning to improve learning and achievement.

Curriculum Differentiation...

is a process teachers use to enhance learning to improve the match between the learner's unique characteristics and various curriculum components. Differentiation involves making changes in the depth or breadth of student learning. Differentiation is enhanced with the use of appropriate classroom management, varied pedagogy, pretesting, flexible small groups, access to support personnel, and the availability of appropriate resources.

Enrichment...

- Implement curriculum compacting for some students using student-selected, interest-based activities from the Schoolwide Enrichment Triad Model.
- Provide enrichment for all students using the Schoolwide Enrichment Triad Model to enrich all students' academic experiences and provide differentiated opportunities to some students.

the second year began, the liaison became very aware of her need to differentiate for each of the study participants, since they were at different levels of expertise. Two still wanted to refine the chosen strategy and the others were eager to try to add more complexity to the activities.

As the study came to a close, the participants realized that what they had mastered represents a starting point for what they still want to do. They had worked hard to master one

strategy but recognized a need to continue to work on other strategies. Three of the five members have continued to read work about differentiation and are sharing their resources with others. There have been comments from several of them that this long-term opportunity should be available to others on the staff as well. It is the intent of the liaison to work with the staff development director to consider frameworks for offering this training to other interested staff in the future.

Quotes From Study Participants

“As a result of using differentiation strategies in my classroom, I have seen a rise in student enthusiasm and student involvement that directly correlates to the choices a student can make.”

“There are unexpected benefits to this study. I am writing out lessons in a more organized way and putting a better structure to what I do.”

“Differentiation has given my students a sense of empowerment that they were not used to, or even knew they had.”

“My greatest success in using differentiation was to watch my students take charge of their learning.”

“Pre-assessment has become a way of life for me. It is so much easier to identify my students' needs through the use of this tool.”

“I have changed my way of thinking in relation to planning lessons, pretesting, and how I approach projects.”

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