

Helping Today's High Ability Students Attain Greatness

A Look at Current Best Practice

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Abstract

This paper takes a look at best practices when working with students of exceptional ability. Almost all classrooms in America have students like these and often teachers aren't sure what to do with them to develop their potential. When these students are not cared for in a quality way, the results can be dastardly. Students can show minimal growth on standardized testing, may become passive about school, or may use their skills in a negative manner at home or in the school setting. This paper takes a look at what works best for these students and offers advice for teachers working with them. There are many options for today's classroom teachers and hopefully they take the time to get to know their students as they create a quality and worth while program. Each child is different and has very different needs that should be attended to.

Introduction of Issue

The purpose of this research paper is to delve into the educational issue of aiding high ability students in today's classrooms so they will have the opportunities to grow as much, if not more, as the other students in the same room. Funding, staffing, and curriculum are not always available in the typical school setting to help higher-achieving students get what they need to have a successful year. We cannot assume that higher students will thrive in a normal, slower curriculum.

A writer at the Huffington Post, Seth Freeman (2010), writes, "I shared the cultural assumption that bright or gifted young people will almost always find ways to navigate a dull, unchallenging, regimented system and use their special talents to succeed despite their circumstance. Perhaps some will, but unfortunately many won't" (p. 2). It is imperative that teachers make sure *all* students are being reached. So, what's the best way to help these young ones? Should a teacher focus more on acceleration groupings or enrichment of the regular material being taught? These are the questions I seek to answer in this document.

Is Someone Asking the Same Questions?

There are many people asking this same question and it has been asked for many decades. The parents of high ability students are possibly the most common. These parents want to make sure that their child is getting the best education possible and growing as much as all the other students in the classroom. They want to see their child doing remarkable things because they know they have great potential. So these parents find themselves asking each other and the teacher, "What is being done to make sure my

child thrives?” Teachers must have a clear answer; one that is honest, genuine, and being implemented.

Another group of people asking this same question is the media. When test scores are made public, it is easy to see correlations among children. Many studies have taken place to link success or failure in school to success or failure later in life. David Shenk (2010), author of “The Genius in All of Us: Why Everything You’ve Been Told About Genetics, Talent and IQ is Wrong,” writes to the public, “Studies of ‘gifted’ children and adult achievers show conclusively that we can’t assume that early promise or a lack thereof is a clear sign of future success” (p. 1). The media wants to know why high achievers in schools aren’t being pushed to their full potential. They want teachers to find a way to develop their abilities as much as possible so they can contribute to our fine country.

Teachers ask similar questions as well. They want to know what to do with these intelligent people in their classroom who catch on quicker than all other students yet sometimes show minimal growth on standardized testing. How can we get them to make the same leaps on the data scale as other, lower, students in the classroom? What are the best methods to use – acceleration or enrichment? These are all very good questions that need answered.

The last group of people worth mentioning is the federal government. They also would like some clear answers and a quality program that will help these young Americans excel. Ann Robinson (2010) stated in her NAGC Presidential Address that the President’s *Blueprint for Reform* included gifted education, which she views as a step in the right direction. Now that the words are printed, our country can move forward with

what they mean and begin putting them into action (p. 43). The government wants to make sure that we are not just focusing on struggling students.

Who are the Stakeholders?

Principals and teachers are the closest internal stakeholders of this issue. They are the ones who have the direct control to make sure that high-ability students are reached. They have the control to choose the curriculum and decide what's best for their students. It is the hope of public education that teachers take the time to plan out a quality program for their higher learners. When they do so, they are using their knowledge and skill to help all students and do what's best for them.

The state governments are also important stakeholders. They are both internal and external. They help set the standards and choose the curriculum for our high ability students. This makes them internal stakeholders. They also benefit greatly when students go through the public school system a success. The states can rejoice at having a state full of quality citizens. This makes them external stakeholders. In order for our high ability students to make an impact on Indiana, the Department of Education (2010) recognizes that "the need for comprehensive and continuous levels of services for students of high ability that are differentiated to meet their academic, social, and emotional needs has been well documented" (Burney et al., p. 3).

The parents and students are very important stakeholders. I would consider them to be internal and external both. The reason they are internal is because they have a voice and can say something to the teacher if either of them have a concern with the curriculum. They also have the ability to choose the school they want to attend. They are also external stakeholders because they have minimal control yet are greatly affected by

what happens in the classroom. Katrina Eddles-Hirsch, Wilma Vialle, Karen Rogers, and John McCormick (2010) wrote a related article for the Journal of Advanced Academics. The article states that “years of academic neglect may not only impinge on talent development, but may also impact the social and emotional development of the gifted child” (p. 108). Our students are counting on us to not let them down and so we shouldn’t.

The last stakeholder worth mentioning at this time is our country and the future it holds. Our country is an external stakeholder. When students are pushed at their level and are highly successful, it has a major positive impact on the future of our world. We can be hopeful of a brighter tomorrow, filled with talented individuals who are using their skills for the better of our society. It is difficult to see these positive changes from day to day, but they surely add up and make a very positive impact.

What are the Variables?

There are many variables to consider when analyzing this current issue in education. Many things impact how much a high ability child will grow during the school year as reflected on standardized testing. Teachers need to be aware of these variables when working with high ability students so they can be sure to make them as successful as possible.

The article “Guidelines for Developing an Academic Acceleration Policy” which appeared in the Journal of Advanced Academics (2010) takes the stance that high ability students need accelerated studies as proven through research. They claim that to help these young students along, it is good practice for schools to have an acceleration policy or curriculum in place. The article goes on to say that students’ needs are ensured to be

met when there is such policy created (Colangelo et al., p. 182). This is an important variable and one that can be forgotten or ignored by schools and teachers.

Another worthy variable to consider would be that teachers take the time to get to know their students' strengths and weaknesses as a student. Teachers should administer pre-tests and take notes about students so he/she knows what each child is capable of and where that child should be learning. When paying close attention to each student, it is obvious to know which students are high ability and which ones aren't. Then, a proper program can be put into place. Mary-Dean Barringer, Craig Pohlman, and Michele Robinson (2010) suggest that teachers create a framework with which to organize information for each student. This helps the teacher gather as much knowledge as possible and makes program-designing simple (p. 35).

When teachers don't take the time and energy to carefully understand each child, a causal variable emerges. The teacher fails to meet the needs of the high-ability student by not alter the teaching. The high ability student or students are then stuck learning things they may already know or may be moving at a pace that is too slow for them personally. This can be detrimental for the student and could turn the student off to education as a whole.

Another important variable to think about is the attitude that students bring into the classroom. If the high ability student has had a good experience at school so far, they may be able to work alone at a faster pace or possibly in a small group setting. If they don't enjoy school for some reason or do not like learning, they may not be able to work alone and may even become a discipline problem in the classroom. It's hard to know for sure how high ability students will respond to a separate or unique program because all

students are different and have different backgrounds. All these variables are important to consider when working with high ability students.

When did the Issue Begin?

The issue of developing high ability students in a traditional classroom has been around for some time now. In the early 2000's, I remember learning about acceleration and enrichment at Grace College. At the time, enrichment seemed to be what professors were pushing for. Higher-thinking skills were more important than just sheer knowledge and those could be attained easier when enriching current curriculum. Plus, teachers could still teach to the whole class the same topic for the most part without having to deviate too much. It sounded like a great idea, but this issue goes much further back into our country's history.

According to Ann Robinson (2010), the last "big wave of interest in gifted education" was in the 1970's (p. 43). During this time, there was not a big push for higher-thinking skills. The focus was more on content knowledge and learning as many facts as possible, but still, people were wondering what the best way to work with these unique children was. Teachers have been attempting different strategies for years because they don't want their students that grow the least to be the same students who came into the class in the fall with the best abilities.

There was a meta-analysis done by Saiying Steenbergen-Hu and Sidney M. Moon (2010) that was published in *Gifted Child Quarterly*. This study's focus was on high ability and how acceleration practices affected them. They compiled studies done from 1984-2008. The reason they started at 1984 was because "the first meta-analysis of the effects of acceleration was published in 1984" (p. 40). This tells us that acceleration has

been around since at least the 1980's. The dates are hard to pinpoint exactly but it's obvious that this question has been around a long time.

Where is the locus of control?

This issue is controlled by many factors. Some of the control is internal while some of it remains external. There are many things a teacher can do to help their high ability students succeed in a classroom. The teacher holds a lot of internal control. However, the standards that are put into place, the wishes of the administration, and the basic attitude of the high ability students are elements of external control. The classroom teacher cannot control everything that happens inside their room from day to day.

Although this is true, teachers do hold much of the control. The best way for teachers to use their internal control would be to get to know the students as best as they possibly can. They should converse with their high ability students often and ask them what their hobbies are. They should take careful note of what they are specifically good at in the classroom and use that to develop a quality program for them. Some students might do better with an enrichment program, while others might benefit more from acceleration. There is not one best way to benefit high ability students that works for all.

There are many options for working with bright kids. Kieran Egan (2010) in her book, "Learning in Depth," thinks what is best for kids is to have them develop a portfolio of learning during the course of the school year. Each child would choose or be assigned to a certain topic with which they would learn as much about that topic during the year as they could. They would collect findings and projects in their portfolio as the year went on. The participating students will still be on track with the normal curriculum, but would also be asked to work on their topic for the year (p. 21). This seems like a great

option for kids who need a bit more to do and aren't ready for a fast-paced acceleration program.

The external loci of control are much more difficult for teachers to work with. Standards are being put into place all across America and teachers are helpless to control what should or what should not be included in their curriculum each year. Many times, they have little voice in even what curriculum is chosen. The standards are sent, the textbooks arrive, and the only freedom left is how they teach the content. This is tricky to work with and sometimes goes against gut instinct.

Teachers also cannot control the programming that is put into place by administrators. According to a study on the effects of gifted programming by Jill L. Adelson, D. Betsy McCoach, and M. Katherine Gavin (2012), the programs we are using today across America are not working. Their study showed "no positive effects of gifted programming for gifted students" (p. 34). They are attributing this to the fact that the programs put into place are different everywhere you go and have no consistency. They recommend coming up with some sort of national program that is based on best practice.

Why is it an issue?

Helping high ability students is an issue because many of these kids do not show as much growth on standardized testing as other students. They usually grow, but the amount is minimal. It makes educators wonder why. What are educators not doing to help the high ability flourish as much as they possibly can? Sometimes it's because the focus is too much on the lower learners and the high ability students get forgotten about. Teachers don't spend time worrying about high ability students the way they do their lower students.

Although acceleration has been a common method of helping push high ability students, many parents and educators have shied away from it. Saiying Steenbergen-Hu and Sidney M. Moon (2011) believe this is true because the long-term effects of acceleration have been unclear. Through their meta-analysis, they were pleased to report that the long-term effects are definitely positive and parents should feel confident placing with their child in an acceleration-style program (p. 51).

Another reason why this issue exists is because teachers often do not know how giving the high ability students a different curriculum or program might effect the other students in the classroom. They would rather keep everyone on the same page so that no one feels inferior. However, Adelson, McCoach, and Gavin (2012) claim that “gifted programming did not have negative effects on the achievement or academic attitudes of nongifted students” (p. 34). This is good news to hear. Teachers should not be concerned that they are harming their other students by providing different programming for their higher learners.

The last element worth mentioning is the fact that many students enter America’s classrooms with quick skills and a sharp mind. They are ready to be challenged and get highly bored if they are not. When students spend an entire year feeling bored and unchallenged, the effects can be devastating. Students can be turned off to education completely, or worse, use their quick thinking skills in other areas of their life in a negative way. Teachers need to challenge these students so they do not feel the need to find an outlet elsewhere. Enrichment or acceleration programs must take place to help these students.

What can I do?

There is so much that I can do to make sure that this issue is resolved for my own students and possibly for others in my building. I can be open to all different styles of teaching high ability students and willing to be flexible as I work with different kids with unique sets of attitudes. I need to be open-minded. I also need to be willing to accept and try the principal's ideas. I need to use the other teachers in my building as a resource as I program-design for different students.

The state of Indiana offers some insight into program development for high ability students. Burney et al. (2010) shares the following information:

Services for students of high ability must be interrelated with the general education curriculum and designed from a theoretical, research-based, and practical perspective. Programming and services must also reflect the knowledge of how students of high ability develop and learn. This programming must include appropriate curriculum, acceleration, instructional strategies, assessment, and evaluation. (p. 3)

This information tells me that Indiana values looking at each student as an individual and using acceleration as a good starting place. I can use this information as a guide to working with my high ability students this year.

I also need to make sure that I am developing the social and emotional skills of my higher learners. Sometimes, these elements are forgotten and can truly damage a child. Eddles-Hirsch, Vialle, Rogers, and McCormick (2010) show concern that "teachers may unwittingly diminish gifted children's self-worth by praising them for work into which they have not put much effort" (p. 109). This is important to consider. Our students

trust us and take stock in what we tell them. We need to be careful to encourage them at the right time and not make light of their accomplishments.

In closing, it is important to remember that teachers are servants. We are hired to serve our students and do what it takes to make the raw product we get take steps towards greatness. There is no perfect answer to the issue of working with high ability students because all students are different. We must persevere and give our students the very best of ourselves so they can, in turn, become the very best they can be. They will not care what we know until they know how much we care.

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Review of a Current Issue
Evaluation Form

Review of a current issue - Paper and Presentation (100 points):

The major assignment for this course is to identify and to reflect on multiple points of view concerning a current issue.

- Select an issue that is important to you and to the local educational setting.
- Identify a variety of sources representing multiple views of the issue. The sources may include primary sources and representation of popular press views. At least ten of the sources must be identified as 2010 or later. One source should be a form of media. An additional reference should be a primary source.
- Prepare a written overview of your findings using APA style. There is no page length requirement. A reasonable expectation would be eight to fifteen pages, depending on your writing style and the graphics that you include.
- Prepare a presentation of 15 – 20 minutes using PowerPoint or an overhead projector. The purpose of the presentation is to be informational and predictive of future implications. The rubric posted to Moodle will be used to evaluate your paper and presentation.

Evaluation

Required components – 50 points

- There were no fewer than 10 sources.
- All sources were current and represented a balance between the professional and popular press. The Professional sources were reputable.
- At least two of the sources were from some form of a public media.
- At least one of the sources was a primary source.
- The discussion reviewed at least two points of view.
- Each of the following components was included –
 - The salient stakeholders
 - A brief history of the issue
 - The variables that shape the issue
 - Identification of the locus of control

Quality of reflection – 20 points

- The educational significance of the issue was clearly identified.
- Adequate examples and/or descriptions of the educational concerns were included to create an understanding of the issue.
- Multiple points of view were reviewed objectively.
- The recommendations for dealing with the issue were insightful and practical.

Class presentation – 20 points

- The presentation was given in an appropriate length of time for sharing information and it concluded with a brief discussion.

- ___ The Information was displayed visually (i.e. PowerPoint) as well as discussed verbally.
- ___ The presentation was given from an objective point of view. Personal beliefs were identified with the opposing points of view given equal consideration.
- ___ The audience was drawn into the presentation through discussions.

Professional form – 10 points

- ___ Professional grammar and language were used throughout the paper and the presentation.
- ___ Views were expressed in a professional manner, particularly those that were controversial.
- ___ Adequate care and time were devoted to the preparation of the paper and to the presentation.