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Giving Our Gifted Students a Voice

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INTRODUCTION

Gifted students continue to struggle in class because they are restricted to learning the standard curriculum (Clark, 2002). Gifted learners cannot be confined to a proficient level of education and therefore the need to advocate on their behalf continues. Not only can the need be recognized by those in the classroom, but also by those outside of the classroom with an interest in gifted and talented education. (Douglas, 2004) (Kaplan, Summer 2004) Each year the students that are enrolled in gifted and talented programs are asked to do an advocacy for gifted and talented education. They take on different approaches with the majority of them building on a personal teaching experience (Grant, 2002). While writing from three different approaches, three teacher-students captured the totality of the needs of gifted students as you will see in the following examples.

TEACHER ONE

One student made a connection to discoveries of the past that illustrate the need to make special accommodations for persons of every learning style.

He begins "Maybe advocacy for the Gifted and Talented program began in the years between 514 and 520. In the Allegory of the Cave, Plato uses a cave to explain the intellectual advancement of certain individuals. He writes about those who are not content with the bondage of circus, breaking free so that they may discover the cause of the dancing shadows, only to return and find deaf ear."

The body of his advocacy brought the Allegory of the Cave into modern terms as he made connections between the cave and the modern technology that could take on the same analogy. He also describes how we are not all equal in that if you take a general poll of IQ scores, there is bound to be an uneven distribution between the far-left end and the far-right end. After thoroughly bringing the analogy into the world of academia he concludes his advocacy:

"What of specialized programs? Do we not already have them? Do we not encourage the artist in art class, the musician in band, the athlete in football, and the scientist in science? Is not all of academia suitable for the pursuits, desires of the characterized individual? Do we not provide all students with the saw to cut through the toughest of chains if so desired? The artist produces art, the musician, music and the athlete, championships, but what of the scientist, do they produce science. To argue that general curriculum is specialized or to be compared to other specialized programs is inaccurate (Borland, 2002). One program is classified as an elective where the other is core. One program makes the shadows and the other stares in wonder. A musician has their solo, and the athlete has their run, but what of the scientist. They are only instructed to measure. In the Gifted and Talented program, the scientist can also run (Kaplan, Winter 2004)."

Although he has no hands on experience with gifted learners, he is able to derive that there is a natural presence of difference in this world. If it can be seen in the cave, it must also be visible in the classroom. When there is a difference in learning styles and strengths, there must be a difference in

strategy as well.

TEACHER TWO

One of his classmates shared a story that took place as she switched into a GT classroom. She thrives on the same idea that you have to give the student the opportunity to excel in other areas besides their area of giftedness, but she also moves on to confirm that the techniques used to teach gifted students must be different from the techniques used to teach the “regular” student.

I moved from the Midwest to Houston with the intent of teaching in a title one school. I expected for my students to be anywhere from one to three grade levels behind. A few weeks before the beginning of the school year, my principal told me that I would be teaching a third grade GT class. I had no idea what she was talking about, and I literally asked, “What’s GT?” Despite my uncertainty about what GT meant and my lack of knowledge about how to best teach these students, my teaching assignment did not change. Third grade is a Texas Assessment of Knowledge and skills (TAKS) testing grade, and I assume my administration figured that a gifted class was the best place to put an inexperienced first year teacher. As the year went on, these are a few of the lessons that I learned while I was teaching a gifted class.

I was surprised to learn that a gifted child was not equivalent to a high performing child. A gifted label does not necessarily mean that the child will do well in school (as in receiving spectacular grades). I had a small group of students who struggled with reading comprehension. There were other students who had a difficult time understanding math problems. At first, I was confused. I thought that all the children should be “smart” and should not struggle in school, but I quickly learned that I was wrong. Giftedness is not the same thing as most people’s definition of “being smart”. According to Barbara Clark, “Gifted individuals are those who have developed high levels of intelligence and therefore operate or perform, or show promise of operating or performing, at high levels in any of the areas of intelligence.”

I also learned that this is a common misconception among teachers. This is true for new teachers and teachers who have been teaching for many years. Most teachers do not expect me to have any learning or behavior issues in my classroom because I teach a gifted and talented class. That idea is completely false. Gifted students can have trouble learning. They can also have problems with their behavior. This is especially true if they are bored! Gifted students can have difficulty getting along with others when having to work in a group situation. Some students do not have a lot of patience while working with students who are a lower ability level. Another behavioral problem can be that they do not want to listen to the teacher. Other teachers will explain to me that I just need to “tell my students” to do something (like take their time on a standardized test). What these other teachers do not understand is that I can tell my students (until I am blue in the face) that a test should take them at least three hours, and they will not listen to me. I truly believe that some of the students think they are smarter than I am, therefore, they do not need to listen to me!

Surprisingly, it does not bother me. I think this is because I know that they are different, and they will do things their own way. I also think that I understand them. Last year, Trey completed his math Texas assessment of knowledge and skills (TAKS) test within forty-five minutes. Afterwards, he told another teacher, “It was so easy I almost laughed.” The amount of time he spent on the test was horrifying to the teacher administering it. She believed it should have taken him the whole morning. The truth is that he

doesn't need the whole morning. He missed a few questions, and I am sure he could have gotten a perfect score if he would have taken a little more time. I know that it doesn't matter to him though. Many gifted children do not care about grades and test scores (Dole, 2001). That is not what motivates them. I wish I could explain all of this to other teachers at my school. It is difficult to work around the misconceptions that surround a gifted class and gifted children.

I know people wait years to teach a gifted class because they perceive it as "easier". It is not easier to teach gifted children. It is just different. Gifted children will demand the type of education that all children (despite their level) should be getting (Douglas, 2004). They expect a day that is filled with interesting learning experiences that will meet their needs. These students want to learn about things that interest them, and they expect authentic activities. Differentiating and compacting is a must. They need projects that develop their creativity. Basically, they demand more than a day filled with "seat work".

I write about my lessons learned, not to complain, but to try to shed some light on common misconceptions about gifted students. I want people to know that a gifted child may be gifted in only a certain area. They can still struggle in school or even have special needs. Gifted children may not care about grades, but they may be motivated by authentic learning instead. Behavior problems do exist in gifted classrooms. Most importantly, I want people to know that teaching a gifted class isn't easier. It is simply different.

If Gifted and Talented students are recognized, there must be teachers that can continue to educate them without causing them to be bored and lose interest in school (Baker and Nimz, 2002). A child must go to school, and educators are responsible for ensuring that each child is able to thrive in the classroom.

TEACHER THREE

A third student captured the devastation of not establishing and supporting gifted and talented programs in her advocacy. She too does not address any classroom related experience, but her research supported ideas advocate gifted and talented students.

When a [plant](#) grows for too long in its container, it generally becomes [root](#)-bound. With no room for additional growth, roots become tangled, matted, and grow in circles. This results in a choked condition, stunting the plants growth and potential. (davesgarden.com)

Just as the confines of an ill-fitting pot can stunt the growth of a plant, a limited academic environment can induce this same "choked condition" for gifted students. Whereas plants require an ample amount of space to spread their roots, gifted students need ample opportunities to utilize their abilities, expand their horizons, and realize their fullest potential.

It is a common misconception that gifted students can thrive on their own, requiring no additional services. Brain research reveals that an individual will progress or regress depending on the amount of stimulation provided. "Just to retain their giftedness-not to mention furthering their potential-gifted students must have educational materials and experiences appropriate to their level of development." (Clark, It is through quality gifted programs in schools that students are given access to these materials and experiences, all of which are vital nutrients in helping a gifted child's learning progress. 😊

SUMMARY

Although it has been thought that every child is receiving the education they need, for gifted and talented students, this is often not the case. Gifted students should be able to thrive as well as those that have not been identified as gifted. It is an injustice to try to teach a gifted student against the same standards as a student without an area of giftedness. These three teacher-students establish the need to specialize the curriculum, put forth the work to meet the needs of gifted students and provide an environment that nurtures their giftedness. The examples used help illustrate the presence of gifted students in regular classrooms and their needs as learners.

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