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Uncovering Hidden Programs

“Thank you for attending your parent-teacher conference, Mrs. Richardson. I am anxious to talk to you about the great opportunities in store for Sophie next year. She has been recommended and accepted for PACE, the gifted and talented program here at Greenwood Middle School. It meets every Thursday afternoon for 2 hours. We’re thrilled that she will have the chance to work with students of similar abilities and explore her interest in mathematics.”

“That certainly is good news,” responded Mrs. Richardson. “You know, Mr. Spence, that we have long thought Sophie needed some extra work beyond what she is getting in the regular classroom. I’m glad she’ll finally have the opportunity to get that through PACE. I have only one concern. Sophie is a very intelligent and talented child. Her abilities are not only in the area of mathematics. What will be available to her in the sciences and arts? You know she excels in those areas, too.”

Countless parents and teachers have engaged in similar conversations as they have struggled to extend appropriate educational opportunities to the gifted and talented students in their charge. The answer given to Mrs. Richardson’s query is telling:

“Mrs. Richardson, we are well aware of your daughter’s capabilities in the areas of science and the arts. At this time, our program for gifted and talented students focuses only on the area of mathematics. We are fortunate to have that! There are indications that if the math program continues to be such a success and is supported by the parents, community, and educational staff, we may be able to extend it to other content areas in the future. For now, though, math is it. Hopefully, Sophie’s other teachers will provide special assignments and activities for her in the classroom.”

The result of this type of meeting is bittersweet. Parents and educators alike are thrilled—and relieved—that the student will be included in a program that is designed to meet the needs of a high-ability person. On the other hand, both are aware that there are other needs left unmet. Many express the sentiment that at least *something* is being done. They often report that attending a program like PACE, that is suited to the unique needs of the child, is what keeps that child coming to school. As for Mrs. Richardson, she is encouraged that Sophie may finally be involved in mathematics suited to her performance level but laments the fact that her talents in science and art may still go unchallenged and underdeveloped.

But, is that truly the case? Has Mr. Spence accurately portrayed the educational program available to Sophie and other students at Greenwood Middle School? Before answering that question, it is essential to explore the possibility that there may be hidden programs at Greenwood that are effectively serving gifted and talented students. Such programs may not have the gifted and talented designation. The absence of that title, however, should not be used as a reason to discount potential growth opportunities embedded within such programs. Schools sponsor many activities that extend students’ talents in significant ways even though they do not come under the auspices of a gifted-child education program. These hidden programs may offer substantial educational experiences for high-ability students and are potentially an integral part of a full service paradigm.

■ CHALLENGING CONVENTIONAL WISDOM

Traditionally, schools have had difficulty gaining support for establishing programs for their gifted and talented students. The reasons for the hesitancy are numerous (Sapon-Shevin, 1994). They extend from arguments within and outside the educational structure but usually center on matters of finances, philosophy, transportation, and scheduling. Too often, trivial matters intervene and opportunities are lost.

One outcome from this decades-long struggle is that many districts are satisfied to have any program on the books. After years of debate, they settle on one programming option and have little energy or desire to push for extending programs into new content areas. For the most part, school districts have a single program for the gifted at each level—usually a resource room or honors program. It will most likely comprise students from one grade level who show exceptional talent. Chances are the teacher is one of the best in the district, and the students eagerly devour their activities. The

ideas and dialogue that take place, even with the youngest of participants, inspire students and teachers alike.

While a program may be all one could ask for and more, parents and educators are often left wondering if enough is being done. “What is happening for these students the rest of the day? Are they truly being challenged? What capabilities are going underdeveloped in this unitary approach to educating students?” These are haunting questions that are mostly answered by unsatisfactory responses. Who knows what possibilities are lost when youths are rarely challenged?

The educational community is well aware of the inadequacy of the present system. It is also highly defensive of the general education curriculum—and rightfully so. With the current reform movements (Gallagher & Coleman, 1995; Gallagher & Sapon-Shevin, 1997) and emphasis on best practice (Fogarty, 1995; Zemelman, Daniels, & Hyde, 1993), a great deal of time and effort is being spent to improve the educational system from top to bottom. Parents are not alone in wanting what is best for their children. Educators select teaching as their profession because they hold a strong commitment to the students that they work with daily.

Surprisingly, they have been about the business of talent development in ways in which even they are often not aware. In fact, they have been developing programs well suited to the gifted and talented for years, but have not affixed a gifted and talented designation to what the programs do. It is these programs that often remain hidden when discussing the offerings available to high-ability students. Typical offerings such as student council, debate, student newspaper, and science fair are all examples of frequently found programs that serve the needs of gifted and talented students in significant ways. They are not programs established solely for the gifted and talented. However, high-ability students profit from participation in such programs as they provide a structure through which they can develop skills and knowledge in ways that are appropriate to their unique learning needs. These are not programs exclusively for the gifted and talented, but they are programs that involve these students with effective results.

The Association for Gifted (1989) recognized this fact when it issued the seminal publication *Standards for Programs Involving the Gifted and Talented*. It is the innovative premise of this guide that when evaluating program efficacy, it is essential that all programs in which these students are engaged be held accountable for meeting their educational needs. It is also an underlying philosophical position that programs do not need to be designated as gifted and talented in order to be a significant contributing force to the education of these students. This leaves a broad spectrum of program possibilities when considering the question, “What constitutes appropriate programming for gifted and talented students?” In essence, many programs are in play. When deciding if a program option matches the learning needs of an individual student, the directing question is not, “Is this a gifted and talented program?” Rather, the question is, “Does this program meet the learning needs of this gifted and talented student?”

This change in conventional wisdom is essential to see the full scope of programming opportunities available to these students. Such change does come with a crucial caution, however. Not all programs are appropriate

for high-ability students. If that were the case, the struggle to assemble challenging programs for these students would evaporate. In Sophie's case, while only the PACE program was available through the sponsorship of the gifted child education department, there most assuredly were other activities and programs that corresponded to her abilities, interests, and needs in the sciences and arts. When responding to Mrs. Richardson's query about the programming options available to Sophie, Mr. Spence could have accurately highlighted Sophie's participation in Arts United, Monarch Watch, and her lab assistant position. The opportunities available to Sophie went beyond the boundaries of PACE and could be represented as potential optional activities when discussing a full-service program that corresponded to her profile of ability (see Chapter 3 for more on profiles).

An abundance of programs from which gifted and talented students can benefit is hidden in every school district. One need only peruse the yearbook, student newspaper, community education class offerings, after-school program brochures, or home newsletter to find numerous examples. However, the search should not stop there. To fully expose hidden programs, community offerings should also be explored. Internships, 4-H clubs, volunteering, and Junior Achievement are among the community-based programs from which high-ability students can profit. Even a family trip and dress-up box hold a wealth of potential for expanding the capabilities of young people. The search for opportunities to develop talent should not be narrow and should not be confined to school-sponsored programs. In order to develop well-rounded opportunities for personal growth, all avenues should be considered. With the guidance of such people as parents, educators, mentors, counselors, and other students, the gifted and talented can be part of challenging programming efforts that expand their abilities and perception of the world.

■ WHY PROGRAMS REMAIN HIDDEN

Only one explanation lies at the root of why many programs, that could appropriately serve gifted and talented students, remain hidden. There is a misconception that specialized programs for these students are the only settings in which their needs are well served. This simply is not the case. In fact, varied experiences far better serve this population than one set track. Gifted and talented students, like all students, have a variety of abilities and interests. Rarely will one program focus on all of these areas. Therefore multiple options are necessary. Unfortunately, the program for gifted and talented students is unlikely to be in a position to sponsor them all, as resources are rarely sufficient.

This is not to say that programs specifically designed for the gifted and talented are not a vital component of a full-service approach to programming for these students. They absolutely are! The need for rigor in academic programs is essential and must be the linchpin of any effort toward talent development. There is no replacement for challenging content in academic programs. The premise of this discussion is that it may well be necessary to augment the standard program for these students with additional options in order to fully meet the learning needs of the gifted and talented. Options are there for the discovery.

The PACE program is an excellent alternative for Sophie and essential to her growth and development in mathematics. However, other options are needed to deal with her precocity in science and arts. As the district has yet to develop programs for gifted and talented middle schoolers in these content areas, it is to the hidden programs that Mrs. Richardson and Mr. Spence must look. Chances are, they will find additional options for Sophie that will enhance her talent development. The concern that nothing is being done beyond PACE can rapidly vanish as a more complete combination of responsive programming is constructed.

BUILDING PROGRAM MOSAICS FOR FULL SERVICE

The goal of education is to expand students' abilities—not to establish programs. It does little good to offer programming options geared to the gifted if none meet the needs of a particular child. Advocates for gifted and talented students are well advised to promote the expansion of multiple programming options throughout the curriculum (Shore, Cornell, Robinson, & Ward, 1991) so matches to individual talents are more available. Some options may only target the needs of highly gifted students, while others may focus on a broader population. It is through the construction of comprehensive individual programs that learning needs are met.

It is useful to compare the process of building programming options to that of assembling a mosaic (Parke, 1989). An artistic vision inspires a mosaic built from many shards of glass or clay. Artists piece together individual shards of varying colors, intensities, and shapes to represent their ideas—an expression of their vision. Individual pieces flow together to create one mosaic, each piece serving its own function for the whole. When one piece is chipped or missing, the entire mosaic is less satisfying. It requires the whole of the parts to bring forth the complex totality of the artistic experience.

So it is in assembling programs for gifted and talented students. One option or piece will not satisfy the whole. Individual pieces must be carefully meshed to jointly create fully responsive programs for the students. Options must be mixed and matched to the students' profile of ability. It is impossible to accomplish this task using only one programmatic component. Variety is essential in order to correspond with the individuality students bring to the process. Programming options, assembled into a comprehensive program mosaic, establish the best chance students have to attain the ultimate goal that is full service. Missing pieces result in missed opportunities and promise unfulfilled.

Expanding the vision of what might be may buttress the fragile assemblage of programming for the gifted and talented. It requires motivation and insight to break the boundaries of traditional thinking and move to the basics of matching learning need to program options. The more unusual the learning need—the more creative the option needed to address that need. With the remarkable talents and interests displayed by high-ability students, program planners and parents are often left with a challenging

task. Finding appropriate options can be difficult and requires patience, innovation, and a willingness to question conventional practice.

The rewards for the students are great. When a child's picture graces the cover of the annual report of a local business, a student-submitted editorial appears in the local newspaper, or the first annual, districtwide arts festival is the brainchild of program students, it is clear that the outcome was worth the effort. This type of opportunity makes a true impact on the lives and talents of the students. It is no fluke that these are the experiences students later remember from their school days. For it is through intimate expression that personal growth occurs. Bringing talent to bear upon challenging tasks and emerging with distinctive outcomes moves students forward in their quest for meaning.

■ CONCLUSION

Educators and parents of talented students face an ongoing challenge of identifying programming options that correspond to the varied abilities of youths. The range of abilities seen in this group requires creative program development if full service is to be an actuality. Assembling program mosaics is one way to attain this goal. Mosaics become possible when shards are assembled and arranged. Full service can be a reality when a mosaic of programming options is created. From this array, the mixing and matching of program options to personal profiles of ability can commence. As all students bring a unique pattern of talents and interests to their educational experience, a corresponding program mosaic can be constructed to further illuminate these patterns and extend them to new expressions of ability.

■ POINTS TO PONDER

- Full service is possible for gifted and talented students.
- One program option for students of varied talents is not sufficient.
- Multiple programming options are needed.
- Individual profiles of ability are necessary and are to be matched to programming options to create full service for talented students.
- Programming options that serve talented students may well be hidden when they do not carry a label (e.g., honors, gifted) indicating a program that is targeting high-ability students.
- Program planners must be creative and far-reaching in their assembly of programming options for this population.