

# What You Need to Know About Individualizing for Gifted in Your Schools

by Deborah L. Ruf, Ph.D., 2006

**The Problem:** Description of a typical 6th grade classroom: The regular classroom teacher is assigned about 25 children each year who are homogeneously grouped by age and heterogeneously grouped by ability. Her district purchases curriculum materials that work for typical 12-year olds with the goal to be appropriate for the average, typical children in 6th grade. The material is part of the scope and sequence – and the state and federal standards – the district hopes all students can complete and master at least to grade level. The teacher valiantly tries to teach to all 25 students, but knows in her heart of hearts that many of the students cannot keep up. Although she knows, too, that many of the students could accomplish far more, she must turn her attention predominantly toward the children who really need her help. As is usually the case, when the achievement test results for the district come back in the spring, she sees that the general achievement level among the students in her class, most notably in reading and language arts skills, runs from 1st grade through 12th grade level. How can anyone expect her to consistently meet the needs of such a wide range of learners?

**How did this get to be the case?** The last major educational reform took place starting in the late 60s and early 70s when it became clear that too many students were failing or being socially promoted, and that the slowest learners and many minority children around the country were being left behind educationally. Until that time, there were generally three reading groups and three math groups in every elementary classroom, and ability grouping or tracking were common in junior high and high schools. Since the one room schoolhouse became a thing of the past, children have been grouped first by age, then by ability. Various forms of racial segregation often further grouped students. A typical tracking system locked the participants into whatever pace and curriculum were provided, and generally the children in the lower tracks could not possibly earn their way into a higher track because the system automatically kept them falling farther and farther behind. Periodically special programs and provisions for the very brightest students were implemented; but a retrospective study with highly gifted adults indicated that most of the subjects as children had no special learning provisions and were never grouped higher than the top reading and math groups, which were much below their actual ability to learn (Ruf, 1998). In an effort to minimize disparities between and among any groups of children, even the three reading and math groups concept was largely discarded by the mid-1970's in most parts of the United States.

**What can gifted education specialists do about it now?** The gifted education specialist is trained in methods for teaching gifted children. They are shown in their Master's programs how to add complexity at various levels to the subject matter that is taught. They are shown how to assess for sufficient mastery before skipping some lessons, compacting lessons, or adding more complex and interesting opportunities for the gifted students. Generally, the district for which they work outlines how and to whom the g/t

teacher's services will be delivered. If you sense that the approach used in your district is inadequate for the needs of your students, here are some of the options that you may want to consider and eventually use in your own districts:

- G/T teacher as a master teacher and mentor
- G/T teacher as a continuing education instructor for district classroom teachers
- G/T teacher as a building leader
- G/T teacher as a curriculum clearinghouse

**What do you mean and how do I implement these changes?** I will only give you a framework here, a list of specific suggestions of what could be done and what role you might play in their implementation. Almost all of these are structural. You will help the other teachers and your principal see how to move children to where appropriate instruction is already taking place. No one needs to work with more children or write more lesson plans. No new funding is required. But, a whole different way of assessing the situation and possible cures is necessary. Any time you suggest change, many people become uncomfortable and resistant. You need to be sensitive to their fears and reservations as you make your goals, and the means to these changes, clearer to them.

#### ***G/T teacher as a master teacher and mentor***

Most gifted teaching specialists work primarily with the pullout format where identified children at grade level meet once or twice a week for about 45-60 minutes for enrichment instruction and activities. In your own pullout classes you add complexity to assignments. In many cases you determine which students will benefit most from different available topics that you teach, and only those you select participate in some of your lessons. Although you often have the advantage of leaving your students with their regular classroom teachers when you teach a special unit or lesson, your master's level classes showed you how to differentiate in the regular classroom and you can help the faculty do that, too. Set up some examples and share them with your building teachers. An excellent book for teachers to consider and use when setting up opportunities in the regular classroom is Susan Winebrenner's *Teaching Gifted Kids in the Regular Classroom* (2001, 1992), available through Free Spirit Publishing. This is most useful and effective for moderately gifted children, what I describe as Level One gifted students ([\*Losing Our Minds: Gifted Children Left Behind\*](#) (2005)). Although there are many, many books and resources for differentiating curriculum, it is generally too much work and too cumbersome for most busy teachers and it still cannot reach the wide variety of learners that are part of the typical mixed-ability classroom. I cannot emphasize this enough.

One of the strategies I prefer when demonstrating different strategies to the teachers in your building is to give them articles and handouts that support what you have taught them. I have handouts to answer nearly any question. I have handouts that parents or teachers can give to each other to better explain something. As an instructional leader in your building you can provide packets or web sites or workbook suggestions when a teacher tells you about a student who needs extra help or practice but does not need to move to a lower level. You can use such packets, handouts, and materials, also, when a student wants to move on, or who goes faster and finishes work more quickly. There are

all sorts of simple ways to provide extensions. In fact, enrichment is quite common in our schools already. I am talking about something more. I am talking about moving the child ahead in a subject like math. Pull together lessons from several books or workbooks that are at progressively higher grade levels. The way the material spirals and repeats makes this quite easy. Allow the child to do a few problems from each section at the end of each chapter. They can go back within the chapter to self-instruct what they don't yet understand. Let them use an answer book to check their own progress. Many very bright students can teach themselves when given this sort of material. Depending on the students' actual math aptitude, they can cover between two to six grade levels within one school year. This is an excellent way to prepare some of the most highly gifted students to eventually join a class at a higher grade level without having too many information gaps. The brightest math learners will fill in their own holes later when they encounter gaps in their knowledge.

The first four of the following methods are covered in Winebrenner's book as well as many other education classes, books and journals.

#### *Within the regular classroom*

- Compacting
- Testing out
- Grouping by readiness
- Centers & Packets
- Teaching units with multi-level curricular materials

The fifth method is one that works quite well for a class that has many different ability, especially reading, levels. In fact, it is my first choice method for those times when you have the highly, exceptionally, or profoundly gifted student joining age-mates to work in either your gifted pullout class or the regular classroom. Subjects such as social studies and science units accommodate this approach quite well. Whatever the topic, use the grade level textbook as your guide or outline for all the students. Then, gather materials from the Internet, the media center, and request books and artifacts from your students' families. You can also arrange field trips and demonstrations by people in the community who know about your topic. Finally, set up assignment guides that are individualized by reading comprehension ability. By this I mean, think of how well each of your students can read and understand material. How likely are they to be able to complete a complex writing assignment? You will quickly see that there is considerable overlap among your students in their abilities, but that some work more slowly and need more support, while others can move ahead fairly independently.

Whole class instruction takes a back seat to individual progress at one's own level and pace. Everyone can see a video and get some meaning out of it and probably enjoy it. Field trips and museum visits invite different levels of participation and involvement, as well, and can be good for the whole class. Perhaps some of your students can attend a more complex demonstration at the museum or science lab while others simply get a basic tour with simpler demonstrations. The reading materials that you have gathered can

be assigned according to reading difficulty and amount of work time required for completion by your different students. One way to make the children feel that no one is getting assignments based on being less able or more able than others is to have enough variety that even the children who are basically the same in ability have a few different expectations. Each child's list should look about as long but you will balance tasks by complexity and length of estimated completion time *for that individual child*.

Once you have all the assignment sheets ready and all the materials and schedule posted or available for your class, you become the facilitator rather than the lecturer. The children move about and share materials and end up helping each other decipher what they are supposed to do. You give support, guidance, and feedback, and you evaluate their work as they go along. Because you are not lecturing to the whole class, you have more time to guide individuals. If you set up the assignments cleverly enough, your students will always know they have other work they can attend to when they finish other assignments early.

A final word on this approach: It involves a fair amount of up-front planning and work, but then each day is a breeze. The lessons unfold naturally because you simply refer to their own assignment guide and provide the time for working. It is also wonderful when you need a substitute teacher because the children already know what they are supposed to do on their own. You can nip and tuck at their assignments if you see you have misjudged their pace of working. Evaluation can be from the grade level textbook test or from projects and products each has been assigned.

### ***G/T teacher as a continuing education instructor within your buildings***

Talk to your principal about giving mini lessons to the faculty periodically during time before or after school concerning ways to meet the needs of their gifted students. You could also have other gifted experts, such as your district coordinator or someone from the state gifted organization's speakers' list, come in to address your faculty during faculty workshops or meetings. As the staff comes to you for information and with their questions, note the topics that need to be addressed within your school and talk to the principal about these and how you might give instruction to the faculty in the near future. What topics should you address? In my opinion, the most important information that you can pass on to faculty is that there are very different levels of giftedness and that some children who are not "officially" gifted have strength areas that need to be given the chance for nurturance. Quite often the principal, other teachers, and parents look to you for information about who the gifted children are and how they learn. Pullout gifted classes once or twice a week with other bright children their own age is a start for most of these children, and it relieves the teachers of some of the burden of trying to make school the way these children and their parents seem to expect, but it is insignificant to a 30-hour or so instructional school week. Furthermore, "gifted is gifted" is not accurate for a population that can be as wide-ranging in ability and accumulated knowledge as the rest of their grade level classmates combined. David Lohman's research with standardized ability and achievement tests shows that grade the typical 1st grade classroom already has 12 grade levels of achievement within it (1999). An ability range that wide needs more than a nice singular elementary, but complex, unit on some enrichment topic. So, your

first step is to let the other adults in your building know about levels of giftedness, the sometimes uneven profiles of gifted children, and some of the ways that gifted boys and gifted girls differ in the way they behave in school. You need to let them know that some of the most highly gifted will be terrible students, noisy and uncooperative, seem to have bad attitudes, and so on.

When a teacher has a student who seems very quick but who causes distractions and doesn't perform as expected, this may be a student who should be assessed for intellectual level. I use the Stanford-Binet 5 in my consultancy because it covers an age range of two to 85, which reduces any problems with ceiling effects (running out of test and not finding out just how extremely capable a child is). The group ability tests that most schools administer are not as accurate as individual tests, but they are a good inexpensive starting point, as well. These are usually embedded in the achievement tests like the Iowa Basics or California or Stanford Achievement Tests and reported as an SAI, School Ability Index. Popular group tests include the Cognitive Abilities Test (CogAT) and the Otis Lennon (OLSAT). If the child in question is already obtaining very high achievement scores, you may want to find out just how high he or she really is. The gifted coordinator, teacher or parent can have such students go to a higher grade level for their achievement testing. If their scores are still in the upper 90s percentiles, they are probably highly gifted. Keep in mind that standardized achievement tests are highly correlated with ability test results.

Pass out web site information and have specific handouts ready to give teachers who come to you with specific questions and concerns. Generally I tell people that if they somehow were aware that they were among the smartest 2 or 3 kids in their elementary school classes, even if they were not the best students, then their true IQ is likely above 130 on the standardized IQ test scales, which have lower numbers than some older individual tests (Ruf, 2003). For my own study of highly gifted adults (Ruf, 1998) I accepted anyone who remembered getting 99th percentile scores ever on anything in elementary school. People's percentile scores are likely to go down as they take part in ever more selective testing, e.g., SATs and ACTs and GREs. The pool of people taking these tests is already more specialized. So, just because you haven't been told that some of your students have IQs over 130 or 140 or even 150 doesn't mean you have never had such a student in your classroom.

The other changes that reviewed in the following sections are among the topics that you can present to your faculty and district staff during instructional periods you have with them or individually as you mentor the other teachers.

### ***G/T teacher as a building leader***

Let me pause at this point to give you a true story about my own experience early in my career. I taught elementary school in the 70's in an urban suburb of Washington, DC. By the second year in my first school I was already in a master's program and learned about departmentalizing and team teaching. The most straightforward way to departmentalize was to have an entire grade level team select their favorite courses to teach and then teach the same lesson to all three or four classes each day by having the children move around

to the different rooms where all the materials are set up in that teacher's classroom. My team knew me and was willing to try it. We liked it and the kids liked it. After two years, a district change moved me to a new school and new team. I wrote over the summer to the other teachers who would be on my new team and told them about what we had done in my previous school, what my favorite subjects were, and told them I wanted to do that in the fall. I was pushy because I didn't know any better in my youth. But, somehow, the four of us decided to go ahead and claim our favorite subjects. Before too much time had passed, we noticed that the ability spread within our classes was so great that we had to meet too many learning needs in too many directions. So, we changed our set-up to include two large groups, one for each teacher, where one class was high average and one class was low average in that subject. We used primarily our own sense of what we knew about our students to do this grouping, and we decided that we would move students during the year if their performances warranted a change. The third teacher got the students who were struggling the most and she had to do further grouping with those students because the range was still quite large, unlike a group that has many students in the middle. The fourth teacher got the highest ability learners, and once again, she too had to allow for the fact that some of the students were merely very bright, but some were very highly gifted. We taught math and language arts this way and the students, teachers, and parents all loved it. Did we get district or principal approval first? No. It never even occurred to us. When it became known what we were doing, the two different principals we had during my four years there both loved it, as well. Two years into my team's grouping and cooperation approach, one of the other teachers leaned over the lunchroom table and told me that she was prepared not to like me when she got that letter two summers earlier. But, it worked out and we were all very pleased with what we were able to do for children.

It is very important to remember that highly gifted students need significantly less repetition to learn than their more typical age-mates. The scope and sequence of the usual curriculum is set up to include a repetitive spiraling of presentation so as to give typical and slower students many times to practice the material. Even when the highly gifted student is moved ahead several grade levels for a subject, the student is likely to quickly catch on to any missing pieces and get in synch with his or her new class-mates. It is a big concern of many educators and administrators that students might miss important steps. There is no evidence of which I am aware that suggests this is actually what occurs with highly gifted students. Often, in fact, the relief at getting to go at the appropriate pace and level encourages the student to fill in her own gaps through a little extra reading or practice until she is up to speed. If the subject accelerated student has been moved too far ahead, you can drop her back one grade level or provide computer-assisted distance learning, as one option, to fill in the gaps.

You can see that the previously outlined and following structural alterations are not expensive.

## **School Level**

■ Subject area acceleration

- Grade level acceleration
- Team cooperation and sharing
- Across grade scheduling

There is abundant evidence that acceleration works and is not harmful. There are also many, many forms and methods of acceleration (Colangelo, et. al., 2004, Rogers, 2002). Sometimes it is necessary and easiest to simply move a child who is very quick at learning new math concepts, for example, (not memorizing fact tables; that is entirely different!) into a higher grade level class where the teacher is already teaching what the younger child could handle. There are also computer programs and web sites through a number of universities where children can take math on-line and thereby prepare for programs in their own area, programs that use talent searches to screen for the most intellectually able students. Children who read a great deal on their own need opportunities to be with adults, brighter children, or older children who can discuss topics in depth. When a highly gifted child makes an observation during a “Junior Great Books” lesson, often touted as perfect for many ability levels, the observation falls either on deaf ears or leads the class-mates to view the highly gifted child as very odd and obtrusive.

When a grade level has three or more classrooms, it is likely you will have more than one or two highly gifted students. The normal way of setting up classrooms spreads them out so that each teacher is stuck with how to meet one isolated student’s needs or hope that the student will just patiently spend his year waiting for the rest of the class. When the teachers at one grade level start to group across the grade level by ability for some subjects, the brightest students can be taught together and work together. Many highly gifted children get a distorted impression of how able they are when they rarely get to work with others who can challenge and compete with them. It is also problematic when they are rarely with others who think at their level because their comments and observations are often misunderstood or resented. Self-esteem certainly suffers under such circumstances.

Although I am a gifted specialist, I remain quite concerned about all children. As the g/t teacher or coordinator, you can demonstrate to the faculty how to do as much instructional grouping as possible. Use “readiness” as one criterion. These groups can be flexible so that the teachers on the grade level team can move children to faster or slower paced groups as the child’s performance warrants. I also accept requests from the students themselves to be moved. I am more inclined to move a child up than down, however. Keep in mind that children who have been under-challenged for a number of years may opt to do less work if they think they have a choice.

To summarize the structural recommendations for dealing with this situation, they are: a one year grade skip, a move to where the subjects are being taught at the child’s level; and grouping by ability and readiness within the grade level by the teaching team. Highly gifted, Levels Three, Four and Five, the children whose IQs cannot be easily described by the tools used in the schools, these children need much more radical changes, changes of a structural nature, which are covered in later sections of this article and in the book, [\*Losing Our Minds: Gifted Children Left Behind\*](#) (2005).

### ***G/T teacher as a team leader within his or her buildings and district***

Sometimes the student has hit the ceiling of your school. When the student is ready for studies beyond 6th grade but is in an elementary school that only goes that far, you as the change agent and coordinator of this plan need to see what else might be available. Once you get this kind of plan in motion, and you slowly but surely make it known what you are doing, you may be able to convince district administrators to provide some sort of system that allows students to move ahead for some parts of their day to the middle or high school level for coursework. I am a believer in keeping even the brightest students with age-mates for some part of the day for lunch, physical education, and other subjects that deal with young little bodies. I do not believe that a highly to exceptionally to profoundly gifted child finds significant social benefit from being with immature age-mates (and the gifted child is also immature when young) who cannot help but notice how different and odd the highly gifted child is. In fact, I recommend bypassing middle school completely if the child is radically different from age-mates unless there are provisions for putting the very intellectually different child with others who are at a similar level. In an ideal world school districts would combine their most exceptionally gifted children into programs for at least part of each school week during the school day. It is not my purpose here to focus on strategies that are beyond the scope of the g/t teacher's powers, so just the mention of possibilities is sufficient for the time being.

### ***G/T teacher as a curriculum clearinghouse***

Two types of materials should be a part of the g/t specialist's supplies: information about gifted children and how to teach them and curriculum materials that can serve as supplements to the regular grade level texts and materials each classroom teacher has.

Most g/t specialists have accumulated useful and informative libraries pertaining to the gifted within their schools. My experience is that few teachers ask to read or use these materials. Teachers will usually read a short article where you have already highlighted pertinent information. They will not, however, read a steady barrage of articles or fact sheets or suggestions that you put in their mailboxes (I learned through embarrassing first-hand experience). As you get to know the students in your school or your class, read through your materials for chapters or articles that help explain the way a certain child is and how one might deal with his needs. Share that with others who work with that child. Use some of your manuals for the instructional mini-lessons you deliver to the faculty, and then make it known that the book is available to borrow.

Explore the storage rooms where old books and materials are kept throughout your district. Because it has become popular in the 21st century to ship phased-out textbooks to developing countries, you may wish to lobby for keeping enough of them on-hand for individualizing classroom lessons. Make note of what is there, the complexity or difficulty levels of these materials, and the primary topics they cover. Demonstrate to your teachers that you can help them with their multi-level unit planning by procuring some of these materials when they tell you their topics. For example, if the regular classroom teacher is teaching an Egyptian unit from a 4th grade social studies textbook, hunt for textbooks from other grade levels which might also have Egyptian units, even if they are a little old and musty. The reading levels will be different and the texts could be

very useful for assignments to children with different reading levels. Often the texts that are unfamiliar to the children “disguise” the fact that they are from different grade levels. Hurt pride is thus spared.

## In Conclusion

Most things that highly gifted children need in order to learn and thrive is already present in our schools. We have to devise methods and approaches for moving those children to where the lessons and activities are appropriate to their abilities. It makes as much sense to group children by age for learning as it does to group them by height or physical maturity. Everyone knows that a whole new set of problems would arise if we used either of those approaches. Until the basic structure of the schools changes, the people who have specifically trained to work with gifted children have to think and act outside the box, set the example, and lead the way. You are on the right path.

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