

# Curriculum

## for the Gifted and Talented Student

### Theme, Generalization, Topic, and Paradigm

One of the first steps in writing curriculum for the gifted is to begin by making sure that the learning theory that undergirds curriculum is thoroughly understood. The Cognitive Field Theory (Bigge & Shermis, 1999) begins with the *whole* (the big ideas) and moves toward the *parts* (specific, factual content). Curriculum and instruction is student-centered and designed to encourage intrinsic motivation. Learning proceeds in an out-of-order, nonlinear fashion. Learning is meaningful and based on the needs and interests of the student.

As the planner of a unit, the teacher must engage in the same level and depth of thought as the gifted student. Begin by thinking of the abstract theme, problem, or issue around which the topic, strategies, activities, and TEKS may be centered. Starting the writing of curriculum by selecting the abstract theme word may feel a bit uncomfortable at first, but the one distinguishing feature of curriculum for the gifted is the need to focus on universal, broad-based, big-picture ideas. The constant strand that should pervade all of the wonderful activities of the unit is the theme along with the generalization. Again, these thoughts are meaningful in the context of remembering that it is the classic Cognitive Field Theory that undergirds curriculum for the gifted. Curriculum and instruction based on the Cognitive Field Theory begins with the *gestalt*—the whole (the big ideas)—and moves toward the parts (the specific content, the activities, experiences) of the unit. The theme of the thematic unit is much more broad-based and abstract than a topic. A superficial look at the theme should cause one to wonder, “How does my academic content relate to this theme?” Only after thinking below the surface of the theme will relationships and connections to topics beyond the subject area become apparent.

The gifted education curriculum writer has to engage in

analytical thinking to look beneath the surface and discover how that one word or abstract term relates not only to the content being covered, but to the content of every other subject. Every subject area should find a place, a home, and a connection under that particular theme. So, the more broad-based the theme is, the more appropriate it is for the gifted and talented student and appropriate for the unit that is being developed. Whether the teacher chooses an abstract theme or an issue or a central question to be addressed throughout the unit, every lesson should present an opportunity to engage in abstract thought and the exploration of a multiplicity of solutions or answers to problems or questions. As students move from the first to the last lesson, they are moving closer and closer toward a clearer understanding of what that one-word theme is all about. If the theme is taught appropriately, students should leave class thinking about other examples of that theme, problem, or issue beyond the classroom; students should begin to see applicability and connections to other areas.

Classic themes include change, chaos, conflict, exploration, force, influence, order, patterns, power, relationships, structure, and systems. Each of these broad-based themes has applicability to any subject area. For example, if the theme of *systems* is chosen, time spent brainstorming reveals that there are systems in art and science: There are ecological systems, legal systems, transportation systems, language systems, and systems in music, for example.

After an appropriate theme is selected, a generalization that communicates a universal message must be developed. The generalization is a short, simple life-related statement that students can take with them across the years of their lives. To emphasize the centrality of the theme word, the first



word of the generalization should be the same as the theme word. The generalization has the same characteristics as the theme: broad-based, universal, and invites connections across the curriculum. The more closely a generalization relates to one particular subject area, the less appropriate it is for gifted and talented students. If, for example, *images* is the theme, then *Image defines* might be the generalization. In an English class, during a unit on advertising, the generalization *Image defines* is supported by lessons addressing how mental pictures influence consumers; in mathematics, images represent signs and symbols and mathematical operations; in social studies, lessons can explore how the lived experiences of a community of people define who they are. The generalization becomes a recurring refrain that is repeated throughout the lessons and is developed with every lesson. The most appropriate gifted and talented themes and generalizations are those that can be used with every subject in the school's curriculum.

In choosing a topic or content for a thematic unit or lesson plans, a topic about which one is knowledgeable should be chosen. The topic is very specific, closely related to the content being taught. TEKS should be consulted and used to help determine how the content will address selected TEKS appropriately for the gifted. Is the curriculum designed to be taught in a heterogeneous setting where cluster grouping is used? Will it be taught in a pull-in or pull-out program? Will it be integrated with an Advanced Placement course? Is the content going to be taught in a heterogeneous setting? Choose a topic that will add to the knowledge base of the students. Choose a topic that will appeal to the broad-based, abstract learning needs of gifted kids. If social studies or history is the content being studied, the topic may be the Depression or the topic may be child labor, or maybe it's city government or "My Neighborhood" for the Kindergarten teacher. In the area of science, the topic may be biomes or the rainforest. It could be a novel, or a short story, or maybe poetry that the teacher builds a unit around. The topic is the concrete, specific content of the unit.

The writing of curriculum can also involve the creation of a paradigm, an artistic representation of the theme, generalization, and topic (content). The paradigm, a pictorial representation, is a composite of all of the elements of the curriculum and leads to a more in-depth understanding of the generalization. Students could be involved in an initial brainstorming activity centered around the generalization, *Movement impacts thought*. A teacher might engage students in a discussion of how the Civil Rights Movement, Westward Expansion, movements in music, physical movement, or movement in dance have impacted thought. Students could

then be instructed to create the paradigm that represents the generalization. Another activity could involve the creation of a logo based on the paradigm; this logo could be worn or placed on all assignments.

In designing curriculum and instruction for gifted and talented students, the big ideas, the gestalt, the whole must remain central and primary. Begin by choosing an abstract, broad-based theme, a generalization, and finally a topic or the content at the appropriate level of depth, complexity, and

interest. How does the theme relate to the topic? How does the generalization relate to the theme? How should all three—the topic, theme, and generalization—be reflected in the paradigm? The theme and generalization must remain an integral part of every plan for instruction, consistently woven

throughout curriculum. Each point of closure should involve statement and restatement of the generalization, connecting the activities of the day with the theme and generalization. The result will be gifted students who are taught in a manner that's compatible with who they are as producers and creators of knowledge, ideas, and products.

## Every lesson should present an opportunity to engage in abstract thought and the exploration of a multiplicity of solutions or answers to problems or questions.

### REFERENCE

Bigge, M. L., & Shermis, S. (1999). *Learning theories for teachers* (6th ed.). New York, NY: Longman.

**Dr. Joyce E. Kyle Miller** is a professor at Texas A&M University-Commerce in the Department of Curriculum and Instruction. Dr. Miller developed the graduate gifted education program and teaches the online courses in gifted education, research, philosophy, and curriculum and instruction. In addition, Dr. Miller is a Board Member and Board Secretary for the Texas Association for the Gifted and Talented and served as Chair of the Research Division and Chair of the Dual Language/Multicultural Division. Research emphases include gifted curriculum and instruction, cultural diversity, technology, and online instruction. Gifted education presentations have been made for regional service centers and school districts throughout Texas. Presentations also have been made at annual conferences of the National Association for Gifted Children, TAGT, and the biennial conference of the World Council for Gifted and Talented Children in Odense, Denmark, where she served as one of three delegates from the U.S. Dr. Miller presented poster and parallel sessions during the 2017 WCGT in Sydney, Australia. Each year Dr. Miller organizes college tours, career forums, and ACT and SAT practice tests for gifted students in Garland, TX, and surrounding communities. She serves as the Texas ACT-SO (Afro Academic, Cultural, Technological, Scientific Olympics) Chair and as the Chair for ACT-SO Garland. ACT-SO is a national high school product/performance program founded in 1978 by Vernon Jarrett for African American gifted and talented students.