

EFFECTIVE PROGRAMS AND PRACTICES FOR GIFTED STUDENTS

FULL-TIME classes for the gifted, pull-out programs, cluster grouping, mentor programs, honors and Advanced Placement classes, acceleration, independent study, Saturday enrichment classes, early admission, seminars, foreign language, math contests, concurrent college enrollment, summer study programs, internships . . .

As we consider the continuum of services available to K-12 students in Texas schools, a plethora of options come to mind, all of which are unique and have elements that are quite effective, especially with individual gifted students. A qualitative analysis of individual programs leads to the conclusion that there are effective practices that are worthy of replication.

Many of the characteristics of effective programs and practices for the gifted student are based on the Cognitive Field Learning Theory. This theory places emphasis on the whole, the Gestalt, rather than small, more discrete pieces of learning. Learning proceeds from the general—the big picture—to the specifics (Bigge, 1964). Content in the gifted classroom is organized around big ideas, themes, issues, problems. Thinking processes involve drawing conclusions, arriving at generalizations, looking for motives and causes, analyzing, synthesizing, evaluating, making comparisons, and identifying contrasts that are not readily apparent. Thinking, insight, and intuition are emphasized. Students are intrinsically motivated when the Cognitive Field Learning Theory is applied. Application of this theory in the selection of curricular and instructional approaches leads to a learner who is a producer of ideas and products rather than a consumer of that which has been created by someone else.

Effective programs for the gifted address the social and emotional needs of all students. A strong affective component is included and teachers purposefully address the affective dimensions of the curriculum during daily classroom experiences. As students grow in the affective

domain, they are able to function more adequately in an independent, self-directed, self-actualized way.

Effective services for the gifted provide flexible grouping arrangement for all students. There are all kinds of grouping opportunities that educators may use in providing the optimum learning environment for students, keeping in mind that groupings should not become permanent tracks for students. Groups can be formed based on birthdays, eye color, interest, ability—the key is to remember to use varied groupings. Effective services for the gifted include the use of adult mentors for all students. This approach can offer another option for pairing and grouping students. Mentorships can be used to facilitate motivation and personal student growth.

In providing services for the gifted student, what other practices appear to be defensible and feasible? There is some concern that the needs of gifted students are provided for in some classrooms and not in others. C. June Maker (1993) made a strong case for the development and use of a Comprehensive Plan for Curriculum and Services to Gifted Students.

the existence of a comprehensive plan has numerous advantages . . . if the plan is followed, the result is a connectedness in services and curricula to meet the varied and changing needs of gifted students. The advantage for teachers is that they know what is expected of their teaching, as well as how the program in their classroom is expected to fit into the overall plan for a child's education . . . For the administrator, a comprehensive curricular framework is the tool needed to help facilitate the training, management and monitoring functions necessary to assure that the needs of gifted students are being met. (p. 424)

Two ways to provide training for and strengthen collaboration between teachers include the use of teachers of the gifted who volunteer their time to provide

special assistance to regular classroom teachers in making provisions for the gifted students they serve and the use of the demonstration teaching model. These school-wide, collaborative programs can be used to ensure that teachers are provided regular, ongoing training to accomplish their goals in meeting the needs of gifted students. Maker (1993) recommended that each school's instructional leader provide the necessary management at the classroom level to ensure the implementation of the purposeful plans to meet the needs of the gifted.

Effective G/T programs and practices address teacher selection and training. All teachers are selected carefully and are provided ongoing training in how to appropriately meet the needs of the gifted student. Modeling, observing, direct teaching, and opportunities to receive feedback help to ensure that new information learned will be internalized and implemented in the classroom. Training for those providing services for the gifted should be comprehensive.

Comprehensive training programs ensure that the nature and needs of the gifted are addressed—curriculum that emphasizes depth and complexity and instructional strategies for the gifted are specifically included and the identification of the gifted with an emphasis on the social and emotional needs of the gifted are integral parts of a training plan.

Finally, effective programs for the gifted involve parents of all students in an ongoing, purposeful way. Parents can play an important role in the planning, development, and implementation phases of programming for the gifted. Parents who are involved in the comprehensive training component of the program can provide invaluable assistance as classroom volunteers.

Effective programs, services, and practices for the gifted learner come in all shapes and sizes. Seven effective practices that are basic to any effort to provide for the needs of the gifted have been addressed:

1. Develop programs and services for the gifted student that are theoretically based on the Cognitive Field Learning Theory.
2. Begin with a frame of reference that addresses what the student can do, and proceed by providing

program and service options for that student. With this beginning, the results will be a dynamic set of program services for all students.

3. Develop programs and services for the gifted that address the affective, social, and emotional needs of students.
4. Address the principle of flexible grouping arrangements in programs and services for students.
5. Strengthen collaborative efforts with all teachers by developing and implementing a comprehensive plan for curriculum and services to gifted students.
6. Select all teachers carefully and provide regular, ongoing comprehensive training in gifted education principles and strategies.
7. Provide purposeful opportunities for all parents to become advocates for gifted education.

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Joyce Kyle Miller, Ph. D., is a professor at Texas A&M University-Commerce in the Department of Curriculum and Instruction. Miller developed the graduate Gifted Education program and teaches the online courses in gifted education, research, philosophy, curriculum, and instruction. In addition, Miller is Board Secretary for the Texas Association for the Gifted & Talented and served as Chair of the Research 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 Sydney, Australia, and Odense, Denmark, where she served as one of three delegates from the United States. Each year, 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.



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