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Collaborative Learning: Gifted Students in the Regular Classroom

Dennis M. Adams
Mary Ann Rotondi

Unique collaborative learning possibilities exist when there are a few academically talented or gifted students in a class. Under the right conditions they can advance socially, develop intellectually and make a contribution to the regular classroom. The research evidence from related fields is overwhelming: students of all ability levels learn more and have better attitudes toward others when they work together as a group (Wang and Walberg, 1985). Cooperative learning activities can help the gifted avoid boredom — while assisting regular students.

By providing the right kind of learning activities the classroom teacher can build on the power of collaborative peer learning to help students work together actively and democratically to develop ideas and solve problems. As regular and gifted students talk and work together, the teacher facilitates learning by maintaining a good learning scene, monitoring group progress and demonstrating the unique power of peer collaboration. The extensive field of the language arts — reading, writing, speaking, listening — is an appropriate area for cooperative activities across ability levels.

Concepts to consider

Classroom teachers need to be aware of learning style characteristics of gifted children. Once their needs and

leadership qualities are understood, the regular classroom teacher can develop organizational patterns and make use of collaborative learning strategies which benefit everyone in the classroom. By collaboration with other students, the gifted student can help everyone move forward while preparing for leadership roles that are so important to our society's future.

Problem-finding is one of the most important skills for the gifted learner. The ability to look at specific events and decide which ones are worthy of further analysis is a socially useful skill that we squander at our own risk. Working together, all children in the classroom can move from absorbing facts to thinking of solutions to the problems and, ultimately, to deciding which problems are most urgent to solve.

There are many high-quality models for gifted programming. The difference such programs make to gifted students should not be underestimated. High grade point averages, test scores, honors, self-concepts, and vocational goals are demonstrated among students in special programs for the academically talented. Gifted students benefit most if they are placed with an instructor who has special expertise and a proven track record in working with the gifted. Such teachers may be regular classroom teachers rather than specialists; therefore it is particularly important to have inservice programs. It is also useful to form school enrichment teams of interested faculty and parents.

Some practical suggestions

- The fine arts provide an excellent area in which to develop collaborative activities between regular and gifted students. The qualities of good art, like good science, are rigor, enthusiasm, uncompromising standards to measure performance, and demand for long hours of disciplined practice. "School

enrichment” teams can help bring students to art museums—and take art museums to students through speakers and videotapes. Mentors can also offer programs allowing the artistically gifted student opportunities to work directly with artists or museums.

- The study of myths, folk tales, legends and fairy tales can be used to examine similarities and differences between people and cultures. Particular themes such as those of Faust and Prometheus inspire discussions of major cultural traditions and ideas.

- Biographies can provide information about values, motives and accomplishments — and provide role models for students. Historical fiction enables students to gain an appreciation of various authors’ works and an understanding of the fact that literature is not written in isolation.

- Even though many teachers below the high school level have had limited science instruction, emphasis on inquiry training and the teaching of the processes of science has made a significant difference to student knowledge, skills mastery and attitudes. Problem-solving and critical thinking can be taught in the science curriculum in which the teacher continues to be a learner. Helping regular and gifted students develop an understanding of the scientific method as an important intellectual tool will prove to be a lasting contribution as they move toward higher education.

- To keep gifted children from concluding that everything worth knowing in mathematics has already been discovered, teachers can take historical views of the subject. Teaching probability as a mathematical concept is important; applications of probability are made in insurance, biology, physics,

weather forecasting, psychology, social science, medical research, politics, and numerous other areas.

- A common collaborative learning strategy is to divide a partnership into a “thinker” and a “writer.” One partner reads a short concept or question out loud and gives an opinion about what the answer should be. The writer writes it down if they agree. If not, the writer tries to convince the “thinker” that there is a better answer. If agreement cannot be reached they write two answers and each partner initials one.

- In pairs, students may brainstorm a topic, e.g., list many things that move, things that are deep, sharp, white or soft — with a three minute time limit. Count a fluency score by giving one point for a common response and three points for a creative one.

As a follow-up, each student may choose one creative response and expand on that idea by writing a paragraph. Students then share paragraphs with classmates and include them in a class book for others to read. This activity develops students’ ability to think divergently, a skill which many academically gifted students do not have.

- Take a situation in current events or from literature and have the children work in small groups to generate ideas for ten minutes with judgment deferred. Then take ten minutes to evaluate the ideas, choosing the five best and the five silliest. (Explain that the most unlikely ideas frequently result in the best solutions.) For example, adapt the situation of Daniel Defoe’s *Robinson Crusoe*: a person is washed ashore on a desert island with nothing but a large belt and belt buckle. How can these be used to survive? For ten minutes, groups generate as many ideas as possible. Then for ten minutes,

groups evaluate ideas and at the end of this time bring their choices for their best and funniest ideas back to the whole class.

Suggestions from the research

Our experience suggests that active learning activities can result in cooperation between gifted and regular students. Research on effective instruction suggests a number of points of agreement. Good instructional practice respects different interests, abilities and learning styles; uses active learning techniques to relate what's being learned to a student's personal environment; develops collaboration and reciprocation; and communicates high expectations.

Involving gifted students in cooperative work lessons or classroom projects can help develop reflective thinking skills and active decision making skills across student ability levels. Developing high interest strategies that are based on fluency, flexibility, originality and elaboration in creative thinking profits everyone.

Conclusion

Gifted children are different from others because they have outstanding abilities and are capable of high performance. Nevertheless both they and their classmates can benefit from collaborative learning in the regular classroom. When working with others on the basis of equity across ability levels becomes a natural part of regular classroom life, teachers have a constant opportunity to increase the rate of academic success while making learning more stimulating for each student. If gifted and talented students receive both mainstream and differentiated educational possibilities they will make a better contribution to themselves and society (Adams, 1988).

However, it does take more than deciding that cooperative learning for students with vastly different abilities makes sense in an increasingly interdependent society. Teachers need to be aware of how they can help students — across ability levels — to develop collaborative learning skills. Once students see that peers look collectively to all members of the group for advice on various processes and products, collaboration will flourish. With practice teachers become more adept at forming groups, setting tasks and monitoring progress.

The notion that "none of us is as smart as all of us" is essentially true. We can learn to do as individuals what at first we could do only with others. Collaboration between gifted and regular students can help both groups learn by assimilating and generating knowledge through group interaction and individual accountability.

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