

Introduction to Section I: Qualitative Differences

The most basic principle underlying curriculum development for the gifted is that the experiences for these children must be qualitatively different from the basic program provided for all children. For educators to justify providing special services to this already advantaged group of students, they absolutely need good answers for questions such as “What’s so different about this program?” and “So why are you pulling these children out of my class? You’re not doing anything I don’t do.” Admittedly, the concept of “qualitative differences” is tough to define. Even the experts disagree on its meaning. One thing they do agree on, however, is what it is not: more work. Indeed, one of the most frequent reasons parents remove their gifted children from special programs is the all-too-prevalent complaint, “Now my child has twice the amount of homework, extra reports in addition to basic assignments, and two pages of math problems instead of one . . . and is getting lower grades.”

Qualitative differences also imply that the program be designed to enhance or take into account what is special about these children. If the children are considered different enough (in needs, learning styles, cognitive styles, motivational characteristics) to need a special program, then the curriculum must be built around the characteristics that make the program necessary. Sounds like common sense, doesn’t it? Nevertheless, developing, providing, and justifying a qualitatively different curriculum based on the unique characteristics of gifted children is not easy. Perhaps most of the difficulty lies in disagreement over the purposes of such special programs or in the differing values of today’s multicultural society. Certainly, the lack of research comparing the effectiveness of different approaches is a major contributing factor.

Regardless of the difficulties in defining something as value laden and ambiguous as “qualitatively different,” or of the underlying causes for the trouble, several attempts have been made. The U.S. Department of Education’s Office of the Gifted and Talented (1976) provided the following definition:

Differentiated education or services means that process of instruction which is capable of being integrated into the school program and is

adaptable to varying levels of individual learning response in the education of the gifted and talented and includes but is not limited to:

1. A differentiated curriculum embodying a high level of cognitive and affective concepts and processes beyond those normally provided in the regular curriculum of the local educational agency;
2. Instructional strategies which accommodate the unique learning styles of the gifted and talented; and
3. Flexible administrative arrangements for instruction both in and out of school, such as special classes, seminars, resource rooms, independent study, student internships, mentorships, research field trips, library media research centers and other appropriate arrangements. (USOE, 1976, pp. 18665–18666)

Renzulli's (1977) ideas about qualitative differences are contained in his definition of "enrichment" as experiences that (a) are above and beyond the regular curriculum, (b) take into account the students' specific content interests, (c) take into account the students' preferred styles of learning, and (d) allow students the opportunity to pursue topic areas (where they have superior potential for performance) to unlimited levels of inquiry. His description of Type III enrichment, the only one considered uniquely appropriate for the gifted, provides a clearer picture of what he perceived as qualitative differences in experiences for gifted students. The goals of Type III enrichment are

- to assist youngsters in becoming actual investigators of real problems or topics by using appropriate methods of inquiry,
- to provide students with opportunities for taking an active part in formulating problems to be investigated and the methods by which the problems will be attacked,
- to allow students to use information as *raw data* rather than reporting about conclusions reached by other persons,
- to provide opportunities for students' inquiry activity to be directed toward some tangible product, and
- to provide students with an opportunity to apply thinking and feeling processes to real situations rather than structured exercises (Renzulli, 1977, p. 9).

The expectations for gifted learners are different from those for all children in that gifted learners need to

- have longer periods of time set aside for learning;
- be allowed and guided to design and implement their own study;
- have opportunities to create new information, ideas, or products;
- be encouraged and even “pushed” to engage in deeper thought or investigation;
- be in situations where they can transfer and apply knowledge to new areas;
- develop and show personal growth or sophistication in affective areas through their work as independent researchers, as participants in small-group projects, and as presenters of valuable products; and
- develop new generalizations, based on their processing of raw data.

Common elements in the literature recommend that curriculum for gifted students (a) build on the characteristics unique to gifted students, (b) include concepts at higher levels of abstraction or greater complexity, (c) emphasize the development of thinking skills at a higher level than acquisition and memory, and (d) provide any administrative or other arrangements necessary to enable all pupils to reach their full potential. Other ideas included in some of the descriptions involve considering not only the present characteristics but also the probable societal roles of gifted individuals, expecting different kinds of products or outcomes, and basing instruction on a principle of economy making possible a depth and breadth of learning within a reasonable period of their lives.

Maker (1982a; Maker & Nielson, 1995) developed a comprehensive, organized approach to the development of a qualitatively different curriculum based on the present and most likely future characteristics of gifted children. Table 1.3 shows graphically how suggested modifications relate to the identified or potential characteristics of gifted children. This chart lists the behavioral characteristics of gifted students in 12 areas. This particular listing has been chosen because of its comprehensiveness, its method of development, and its frequency of use in programs for the gifted. Curricular changes appropriate for the gifted in the areas of content, process, product, and learning environment are listed across the top.

When a curricular change is suggested by or built on a particular child characteristic, an X is placed in the appropriate row and column.

In addition to providing a summary of the ideas presented in this section, the chart is an easy reference for those who need to justify or explain how their program is based on the characteristics of their gifted students. It also can serve as a guide for making decisions about curricular modifications for special populations or for individual children based on their characteristics. These uses of the chart are explained in more detail in Chapters 6, 7, and 8.

In this first section, giftedness is viewed in light of evolving theories of intelligence, and the basic principles summarized in Table 1.3 are described in more depth. After each explanation, a justification based on the relationship between the curricular change and the characteristics of gifted children is presented. The five chapters also contain specific examples of how these general principles can be implemented.

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