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Supporting Exceptional Learners

This edition of *Curriculum in Context* is unique, both because the theme is supporting exceptional learners and also because it marks significant transitions. This is the final edition for Kathy Clayton, Executive Director of WSASCD. Kathy has faithfully served in this role for eight years and her efforts and leadership deserve the highest praise. She has remained optimistic in the face of economic challenges, steadfast in her loyalty to students, and persistent in advancing the priorities of the Whole Child Initiative. Although Kathy’s tenure as Executive Director is coming to a close, the trajectory she has established for WSASCD is sure to produce positive results for years to come.

The Board of Directors and editorial staff of CiC welcome Dr. Art Jarvis, who will take the mantle of WSASCD Executive Director this summer. Art has worked as an educator for over 47 years and his experiences and accomplishments as a teacher, principal, and superintendent are extensive. Not the least of his qualifications include serving as President of WSASCD in 1998.

Articles in previous editions of CiC have been organized by their relation to each other, while remaining aligned with a common theme. The theme of this edition, supporting exceptional learners, certainly unifies articles, but it also suggests mixture, multiplicity, and variety. Remaining true to the theme requires layering and interleaving articles, as a reflection of the sublime complexity inherent in classrooms.

This edition begins with a description of Katie Brown’s model for ELL family outreach, followed by Jann Leppien’s summary of principles of high-quality curricula for gifted learners. Sue Ann Bube and Cinda Johnson share research and strategies for transitioning students with disabilities, while Vanessa Tucker and Laura Matson identify interventions for dealing with challenging student behavior. Nick Kummert tells about his use of literature circles for enhancing language skills. Jeanine Butler, Kristi Daley, and Amber Birks propose PLC reform for supporting all students and Gretel von Bargen presents her approach to differentiating science instruction. Angela Anderson shares visual thinking strategies for deepening dialogue. Kathleen Casper and Kathryn Picanco revisit education for gifted and talented students, while Amy Johnson shares lessons learned over 29 years of teaching.

Readers of this edition of CiC are sure to find practical models and strategies that will invigorate and improve instruction. At the same time, the survey of approaches for supporting exceptional learners inspires confidence that educators across Washington are effectively helping all students reach their full potential.

David W. Denton, Ed.D., is an Assistant Professor at Seattle Pacific University. Before joining Seattle Pacific, David taught middle school students, in a variety of disciplines, for ten years. In 2005, David earned National Board Certification in early adolescent mathematics.
A message from the president

by Ismael Vivanco

Supporting Exceptional Learners

Effective educators believe all children can learn. The corollary of this is that optimizing achievement requires healthy and safe environments, where children are supported, engaged, and challenged. Effective educators also know that each child is special and possesses unique aptitudes and talents. At the core of planning lessons, deploying instruction, and aligning assessments is assisting learners as they identify and cultivate their gifts which each child possesses. This is especially true when we work with exceptional learners. Assisting students in this process is multi-form, but differentiating instruction, providing enrichment or remediation, and collaborating with colleagues are a few of the activities educators use to support exceptional learners.

This subject reminds me of a story told by the nationally known speaker Rick Wormeli. Rick described a teacher who pinned a $5.00 bill on the wall, toward the ceiling. The teacher explained to one of his tallest students that the money would be hers if she could jump and grab it, which she did with ease. Another $5.00 bill was pinned toward the ceiling, but the reward was offered to the shortest student in class if he could jump and retrieve it. Despite numerous attempts, he was unable to close the gap through physical exertion alone. However, despite limited height, he pulled-up a nearby chair for assistance, but the teacher dismissed the idea. Students observing these events began mumbling, concerned that the demand, without support, was unfair. Tall and short students should receive the same reward based on performance, not variables outside their control. Although the moral of the story is readily grasped, it’s worth repeating: Students need encouragement, support, and collective effort to maximize their exceptional cognitive, social, and physical gifts.

We all know that each child enters the classroom with a unique set abilities, dispositions, and characteristics. Nevertheless, embracing this axiom is a challenge. However, the work of effective educators is to enable all children to fulfill their potentialities. One litmus test showing adherence to this work is the quality and resourcing allocated toward those with special needs. Significant progress has been made in this area. For example, Dunst (2014) claims that “changing people’s attitudes toward… individuals with disabilities has been a focus of research… for many years” (p. 136). In addition, Dunst (2014) indicates that classroom interactions and cooperation between students with special needs and others promotes a positive classroom environment overall.

Findings from Dunst (2014) are indicative of the transformations that have been ongoing in schools across Washington State for decades. Educators are supporting a wide variety of students with special needs through small and large scale initiatives, from modifying curricula, to analyzing transitions, to expanding course offerings. These kinds of transformations are exciting and they promote new lines of inquiry and collaboration. This edition of Curriculum in Context works toward that end, by providing a venue for sharing, discussing, and inquiring about how to support exceptional learners.

Reference

The parking lot was overflowing. Standing room only in the gym. Families of various cultures wearing headphones in anticipation of the translated presentation, while interpreters wearing neon yellow signs reading “Yo Hablo Español” or “Tôi nói tiếng Việt” greeted parents at the door. The positive energy of a packed house seeped into atmosphere for the past two years at Shuksan Middle School’s Back to School Night. If you had walked into this same event in years past, you would have seen empty chairs and predominately white faces. The Back to School Night transformation that occurred was sparked by the creation of ELL Family Meetings. These evening meetings are geared toward all families who speak a language other than English. When I started my position as ELL Specialist, my vision was to ensure that all families felt welcome at our school and informed about their child’s education. These family meetings have helped me develop trusting relationships with parents and engage our community partners to better support students. When we think about supporting exceptional learners, we must never forget the critical role that parents, families, and our community play.

Access related resources at www.mycoachkatie.com

Many suggest, and I tend to agree, that building relationships is fundamental for learning. (Giani & O’Guinn, 2010). Every learner, regardless of context or age, must feel safe and comfortable in the learning environment. These were the principles we used to establish ELL Family Meetings, and every other school or community event thereafter.

The first critical step was to build relationships and create a team of interpreters who would be consistently available to attend meetings, make phone calls, translate documents, and provide interpretive services (see Figure 1).

It was very important that the same interpreter attend every meeting and make every phone call. This consistency allowed the interpreters to get to know each family personally and, in turn, communicate more effectively with them. Some lessons we learned were 1) knowing the best time of day to call home, 2) getting to talk to the right person, and 3) understanding barriers faced by family members preventing them from being involved. We also learned to take time for questions, address concerns, and help with particular needs. These efforts have paid off. Our interpreters are now seen as an extension of our Shuksan family and our school community. Interpreters are valued members that parents can trust. I personally consider them my dearest colleagues and without them, I would be unable to fully engage families who speak English as a second language.

A second critical element to the success of our ELL Family Meetings is the use of digital transmitters, which allow us to hold our meetings in real time. As I present information, the interpreters translate simultaneously into different languages (see Figure 2). Each language is tuned into a specific channel and parents hear what I am saying, as well as the questions and comments of others, through their headsets in their native language. One mom laughed as she put on her headset and looked around the room, “We look like a mini United Nations!” There is a lot of truth to this statement. This technology allows families to sit anywhere in the room during the meetings since they do not have to sit in proximity to their interpreter,
lending to an inclusive atmosphere rich in cultural diversity.

A third essential component is to engage parents as learners and elicit ideas for meetings based on their needs (Ferlazzo & Hammond, 2009, p. 6). Many parents who attend our ELL Family Meetings want to be informed about the Shuksan calendar and “what was happening at school this month,” but they want to learn about much more. I always start our first ELL Family Meeting of the year by providing parents with a list of potential topics, including:

- School events and activities
- How to contact teachers
- Shuksan PRIDE citizenship program
- How to keep track of my child’s grades and assignments
- Standards-based grading and what it means for me and my child
- Study skills for my child
- School sports, clubs, and registration
- How to talk to my child about books
- How to talk to my child about homework
- ELL proficiency levels and what they mean for my child
- The Common Core Standards and what they mean for my child
- English classes for parents
- Computer classes for parents
- Job training courses
- Community resources for my family
- Benefits of being bilingual
- Parenting tips when you have a pre-teen

Parents have shown an interest in these topics, and all of them provide structure for meaningful support. Each topic meets some need, but sometimes new interests arise and flexibility is required to create a system that supports students effectively. For example, last year eighty percent of parents requested information about our standards-based grading system. For the following meeting, I created a visual presentation to explain standards-based grading and how to read student progress reports. Using our school laptops, parents got hands-on practice accessing grades and feedback online (see Figure 3). I also created a handout, translated into various languages, which showed login information and the steps needed for accessing their child’s grades and assignments online. I heard one parent comment, “I finally know how to talk to my kids about their grades.” Then she chuckled, “My kid is going to love this.”

The information we provided met the need for most parents, but at the same time we also observed some gaps. For example, some parents did not have convenient access to a computer. Still others were missing basic computer skills necessary for monitoring their child’s progress using online tools. As a result, we set up a workstation for parents in our front office with our student information system preloaded and nearby staff available to assist. Although we rely on computer technology to facilitate communication, we also send paper copies of progress reports home every month and provide time at ELL Family Meetings for parents to inquire about their child’s progress.

In addition to grading concerns, parents also requested opportunities to enroll in English and computer classes. In response, I invited our local library to a meeting to share information about free courses offered in our community. We signed up 18 families for library cards that night and 8 families enrolled in a course.

One of the most inspiring moments of the year was when we presented information to parents about the benefits of being bilingual compiled by the Administration for Children and Families (2013). Our discussion surrounded the emotional, social, cognitive, and academic benefits of knowing two or more languages as well as how parents can support first language development at home. We wanted parents to hear Shuksan faculty and staff believe that being bilingual, multilingual, and multicultural are assets, not obstacles. In addition, we wanted parents to know that speaking and reading to children in their first language does not hinder student learning, but enhances it (Páez & Rinaldi, 2006). Our meeting ended at 7:30 that night, but the room was buzzing with conversation until well after 8:00.

**Overview of Shuksan’s ELL Family Support model at goo.gl/Vem6sn**

Our ELL Family Meetings continue to grow in attendance and diversity. At our first meeting in 2011, 10 families attended and almost all were Spanish-speaking. At our last meeting in 2013, 38 families attended, and six languages were represented (Spanish, Vietnamese, Russian, Punjabi, Farsi, and Chinese). As a result of our efforts to build trusting relationships and provide relevant information in first languages, parents feel welcome and valued, and recognize Shuksan as a vital community resource. In turn, we recognize parents as a resource for the success of our students. Overall, we have found that if we communicate effectively with families and engage parents as learners, we can meet the needs of our diverse and exceptional student population.

**References**


Katie Brown is an ELL Specialist, Instructional Coach, and the 2014 Washington State Teacher of the Year. She currently works at Shuksan Middle School in Bellingham where she supports students and families who speak English as a second language. She also leads professional development for her staff and is best known for her ability to help teachers learn how to teach content and language simultaneously to meet the needs of language learners. You can access more resources from Katie and other Shuksan teachers at www.mycoachkatie.com.
Early in my teaching career, I met a young man named Sam who possessed a great deal of mathematical expertise at a young age. He arrived at our school at the age of five and entered kindergarten, ready to learn with great intensity and enthusiasm. Mrs. McDonald, his kindergarten teacher, was eager to work with Sam and provide an educational setting that fostered his love of mathematics. Each and every day, Sam would use mathematical language to explain his observations. The mathematical content and skills that were of importance to most kindergarteners seemed more and more out of alignment with his mathematical knowledge and understanding. It was soon decided that we should administer pretests on Sam to determine a starting point for his mathematical instruction, and I was given the opportunity to help determine his level of proficiency. I soon realized that Sam not only had great expertise in mathematical understanding but also had an unusual way of learning new concepts.

First, Sam enjoyed the testing situation. For him, the test was a game of mathematical reasoning and inquiry. He delighted in arriving at the correct responses, and he pursued ideas that were unfamiliar by asking a series of questions that he soon answered for himself. What was of particular interest to me was how he approached what he did not know. For example, I can remember quite vividly how excited he became when faced with a fraction problem in the third-grade curriculum during the testing situation. The question asked Sam to look at two circles, one that was divided into three parts and one that was divided into four parts (one representing 1/3 and the other representing 1/4). He was asked to name the fraction that was largest, one-third or one-fourth.

As he looked at these circles he asked, “What is this thing called? Everything in math has a name, Mrs. Leppien, so what do you call these things?”

I replied that these visual representations are called fractions.

He then asked me, “Is this like a pie that is cut into several pieces? If it is, then my mother certainly can’t cut straight lines like they do in this picture. My guess is that the question being asked of me is which of the pieces of pie would I prefer, either one-third or one-fourth?” As quickly as he asked this question, he announced, “But it would have been easier had they asked me to compare these pieces as twelfths or twenty-fourths, or something that they share in common.”

Sam’s line of questioning stemmed from his curiosity to know and also from his ability to see patterns and make connections between mathematical ideas. Once he understood the structure of anything (its purpose, examples, and importance to his life), he then inquired about how to play out these ideas in various settings and under different conditions, similar to the way writers play with word choices when constructing sentences that express ideas. Sam would then move toward trying to see patterns or connections between concepts and ideas in order to generate laws or what he referred to as “mathematical rules to live by.” Sam considered himself to be a mathematician, and this became the lens through which he viewed the world.

So What Makes Curriculum Different for Highly Capable Students?

Recommendations Worth Considering

What We Learned About Sam’s Advanced Level of Expertise

I learned many things from working with Sam. I learned that the questions teachers ask are like the questions Sam posed to himself and others. These questions can provide rich invitations for developing student engagement and for promoting understanding of a discipline’s structure, its connectivity to other disciplines or ideas, its modes of inquiry, and how it shapes or affects an individual’s life. Sam’s pace of learning far exceeded that of other advanced level students. What became an appropriate curricular match for Sam was not necessarily appropriate for other students who had been identified for our program. Therefore, as we identified other students for our highly capable program, we carefully had to adjust curricular options based on the advancement in the subject area(s) in which talent manifested, with a careful eye to the type of pacing that was most appropriate to the learner.

The other thing that we learned from Sam was that his strengths varied greatly
There are also students who are just learning who try to differentiate their curriculum. making the challenge even greater for teachers or more areas of study, and students who are experience learning challenges and disabilities that can actually mask their abilities. There are students who are advanced in one or more areas of study, and students who are so acutely advanced in their abilities as to make the challenge ever greater for teachers who try to differentiate their curriculum. There are also students who are just learning how to speak English as well as students who experience poverty and are equally talented, yet they have been denied the opportunity to experience a curriculum that is appropriately challenging to unveil their potential for advancement. Those of us who have worked with students who are advanced or show potential for advancement understand that many of these advanced students are often ill-served by curriculum and instruction aimed at a academic expectations far lower than the one that they can and should reach.

So knowing that advanced students vary widely in their academic profiles and interests, what suggestions can be offered to educators when designing curriculum and instruction for highly capable students? In a review of the literature in the field of gifted education, Hockett (2009) synthesized the voices of curricular experts in the field of gifted education and identified five principles of high-quality curriculum and the commonalities on which they agree. The chart below lists the principles she identified with key indicators of what is meant by the principles, the practices to be considered when designing curricular options for advanced level students, and the experts who advocate these practices.

### The Recognition of Ongoing Support for Developing Expertise

While most curriculum experts in gifted education would agree that these principles should guide the type of quality experiences that advanced learners should receive, other factors must be considered when applying these ideas to advanced learners whose academic profiles vary. At the heart of these principles is the notion that each learner should be challenged with incremental sophistication depending on a student’s individual profile. Expertise is developed over time, with careful attention to the tender balance of challenge and support as suggested by the authors of the Parallel Curriculum Model (Tomlinson, Kaplan, Purcell, Leppien, Burns, & Strickland, 2006). In order to effectively guide the process of developing expertise in any discipline, the authors propose a heuristic for thinking about this progression through the lens of a concept called Ascending Intellectual Demand (AID). AID is intended to serve as a guide in curriculum design and instructional delivery because it articulates the changes that characterize the learner at incremental stages from novice to expert. As students grow from one level of expertise in a subject level to more advanced levels, what the learners may require at each stage along the continuum will vary. To recognize this is to suggest that teachers will need to vary the level of instructional support necessary for a student’s continual growth as well as the sophistication, depth, and complexity of the curriculum to respond to the emerging optimal level of challenge in each learner since AID is always relative to the need of a particular learner (Hendrick & Flannagan, 2009). Varied levels of challenge or AID can

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**Principle 1: High-Quality Curriculum for Gifted Learners Uses a Conceptual Approach to Organize or Explore Content that is Discipline-Based and Integrative**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Curriculum should be organized conceptually that is discipline-based and integrative.</th>
<th>Feldhusen, 1985; Hayes-Jacobs &amp; Borland, 1986; Kaplan, 1974; Maker &amp; Nielsen, 1996; Renzulli, Leppien, &amp; Hays, 2000; Shore, Cornell, Robinson, &amp; Ward, 1991; Tomlinson et al., 2002; VanTassel-Baska, 1998</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Curriculum with a discipline-based foundation uses the principles, skills, theories, ideas, and values most essential to a field of study to illuminate the nature of the discipline itself.</td>
<td>Feldhusen, 1985; Maker, 1986; Passow, 1982; Renzulli et al., 2000; Tomlinson et al., 2002; Ward, 1980</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The structure of the discipline itself informs how the curriculum is arranged; student should be able to see where the discipline “fits” within the larger body of knowledge and from where it originates.</td>
<td>Renzulli et al., 2000; VanTassel-Baska, 1989; Ward, 1980</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Curriculum that is integrative concentrates on the relationships between bodies of knowledge; presents content related to broad-based issues and themes; focuses on cross-disciplinary concepts; and exposes students to multiple perspectives and domains of inquiry.</td>
<td>Kaplan, 1979; Maker, 1986; Passow, 1982; VanTassel-Baska, 1989, 1998</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Integration allows the learner to apply knowledge at multiple levels, transfer knowledge within and across disciplines, see patterns and connections within and across disciplines, and understand a discipline’s depth and complexity.</td>
<td>Hayes-Jacobs &amp; Borland, 1986; Kaplan, 1979; Passow, 1982; Rogers, 2002; Tomlinson, 2005</td>
</tr>
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Continued on next page
### Principle 2: High-Quality Curriculum for Gifted Learners Pursues Advanced Levels of Understanding Beyond the General Education Curriculum Through Abstraction, Depth, Breadth, and Complexity

| Abstraction involves content, processes, and products that are more removed from or less familiar to students’ experiences. | Maker & Nielson, 1996 |
| Students may work with the implications and extensions of ideas rather than concrete examples and illustrations. | Tomlinson, 1977 |
| Symbolism and the underlying meaning of content are stressed, as are formulating theories, examining the philosophical underpinnings of disciplines, and exploring epistemological issues. | Hayes-Jacobs & Borland, 1986; Passow, 1982; Rogers, 2002 |
| Advanced understanding is also attained through examining curricular topics in more breadth and/or with greater depth. | National Association for Gifted Children [NAGC], 1994; Purcell, Burns, Tomlinson, Imbeau, & Martin, 2002; Shore et al., 1991; Tomlinson, 2005; United States Department of Education [U.S. DOE], 1993; VanTassel-Baska, 2005; Ward, 1980Kaplan, 1979; Renzulli & Reis, 1997 |
| Breadth may refer to exposing students to wide variety within or across a content area or, more simply, to extending the core curriculum. | Kaplan, 1974; 1979; 1994; VanTassel-Baska, 1989; 2005 |
| Depth refers to ways of intensifying curriculum - some of which might include using the language of the discipline and examining details, trends, patterns, unanswered questions, rules, ethics, big ideas, and relationships to contextual time. Exploring content in depth also might involve students pursuing an area of special interest at a high level, studying important issues and problems related to a topic, or spending more time on learning a topic. | Kaplan, 1974; Maker & Nielson, 1996; NAGC, 1994; Passow, 1982; Purcell et al., 2002; Rogers, 2002; Tomlinson, 2005; Ward, 1980 |
| Complexity is another way of modifying the curriculum to advance understanding. Content is more complex when it is more challenging and intricately detailed; integrates knowledge and concepts from various disciplines; requires higher level thinking processes; and incorporates different perspectives, theories, principles, and concepts associated with what professionals in the discipline know and do. | Tomlinson, 1997; 1999 |
| Processes and products are more complex when they involve more steps or require more advanced resources, tasks, issues, problems, skills, or goals. For example, students might work with multiple abstractions; merge what they are learning with previous learning or tackle problems that require more originality or elegance in their solutions. | Kaplan, 1974; Maker & Nielson, 1996; NAGC, 1994; Passow, 1982; Purcell et al., 2002; Rogers, 2002; Tomlinson, 1997; 1999 |

### Principle 3: High-Quality Curriculum for Gifted Learners Asks Students to Use Processes and Materials That Approximate Those of an Expert, Disciplinarian, or Practicing Professional

| Processes both general and specific to the various disciplines should be employed in curriculum for gifted students. | Renzulli et al., 2000; Tomlinson et al., 2002 |
| General process methods are those that emphasize discovery and equip students to follow research or inquiry-based procedures, such as assessing the credibility of a resource, following through on an investigation, and learning how to learn other necessary skills on-demand. | Maker & Nielson, 1996; Passow, 1982; Renzulli & Reis, 1997; VanTassel-Baska & Little, 2003 |
| Each discipline has its own ways of conducting research and solving problems as well. The specific ways that practicing professionals work and act are a defensible, desirable aspect of curriculum for gifted learner. | Renzulli et al., 1997; Tomlinson et al., 2002; VanTassel-Baska & Little, 2003 |
| Working like an expert also involves thinking like one. Integrating higher level processing skills in the curriculum—those an expert is likely to use—is therefore crucial. These might include processes for thinking critically, analytically, and creatively; making decisions; asking questions; generating new ideas; defending ideas; reconciling opposing viewpoints; reconceptualizing and transferring knowledge; and solving problems. | Kaplan, 1974; Maker & Nielson, 1996; Passow, 1982; Purcell et al., 2002; Renzulli & Reis, 1997; Rogers, 2002; Tomlinson et al., 2002; VanTassel-Baska, 1998 |
| Curriculum for gifted learners also approximates expertise by developing metacognitive abilities and self-understanding. | Kaplan, 1974, 1979; Kaplan, & Hedrick, 2005; Passow, 1982; Tomlinson, VanTassel-Baska, 2005 |
| All thinking processes must be rooted in content and be a means to an end, rather than taught in isolation. | Shore et al., 1991 |
### Principle 3: High-Quality Curriculum for Gifted Learners Asks Students to Use Processes and Materials That Approximate Those of an Expert, Disciplinarian, or Practicing Professional

The materials that gifted students should use are often described by experts as advanced. These might include resources that are specialized, more varied, more abstract, and require higher level reading or processing skills; that treat knowledge as tentative; and that illustrate interdisciplinary connections through concepts. In any case, students will likely need guidance or instruction in how to use these resources.

Kaplan, 1974; Passow, 1982; Renzulli & Reis, 1997; Tomlinson, 1997; VanTassel-Baska, 2005; VanTassel-Baska & Little, 2003

### Principle 4: High-Quality Curriculum for Gifted Learners Emphasizes Problems, Products, and Performances That Are True-to-Life, and Outcomes That Are Transformational

A defining characteristic of these kinds of problems is authenticity—they mirror problems or are problems in the real world with either no existing solution or a solution that is unknown to the student, are directed toward change or the production of new knowledge, and have a personal frame of reference for the student.

A defining characteristic of these kinds of problems is authenticity—they mirror problems or are problems in the real world with either no existing solution or a solution that is unknown to the student, are directed toward change or the production of new knowledge, and have a personal frame of reference for the student.

This type of problem solving also involves the development of authentic products directed at real audiences. The products emulate those developed by practicing professionals in a field or at least have a discipline-based foundation. These products are evaluated by qualified persons, such as expert judges or audiences who stand to benefit from the results, according to advanced criteria or goodness-of-fit for a certain need.

In problem solving, product development, and performance, gifted curriculum experts promote students working toward outcomes that are transformational. More specifically, students take the knowledge they have learned and view it from another perspective through reinterpretation or extension, form new generalizations and ideas, and develop skills into creative forms for real audiences.

Maker & Nielsen, 1996; Purcell et al., 2002; Renzulli, 1982; Renzulli & Reis, 1997; Rogers, 2002; Tomlinson, 2005; VanTassel-Baska & Little, 2003

### Principle 5: High-Quality Curriculum for Gifted Learners Is Flexible Enough to Accommodate Self-Directed Learning Fueled by Student Interests, Adjustments for Pacing, and Variety

Curriculum experts in gifted education have been strong advocates of individualizing learning experiences for highly able students, due in part to the perceived inadequacy of the general education curriculum to meet these learners’ academic needs. Under the assumptions that (a) the regular curriculum is inappropriate, and (b) gifted students’ time would be better spent pursuing what they want to learn, several program models include flexible components that allow students to set the course for their own learning.

Beyond specific models, experts view flexibility in curriculum for gifted learners in several ways. First, it involves learners making choices about the direction and goals of their learning. Therefore, tasks should be open ended, with no one right answer.

In these endeavors, students should be encouraged to investigate areas of interest more in depth as well as develop skills that support self-directedness, such as organization, time management, self-assessment, using resources, and decision making.

Second, flexibility in curriculum for gifted learners requires adjustments for pacing. This may mean increasing the pace of learning by moving students more rapidly through basic skills or an entire course of study. Pacing also might be decreased to account for gaps in students’ knowledge, skills, or understanding; to accommodate in-depth study; or to make sure a student can apply what he or she has learned.

A third, more generic attribute of flexibility in curriculum is variety. This might include variety in instructional approaches and materials, content and form, learning activities, skills, or learning opportunities.
be achieved in many ways, which may be helpful to educators designing effective curriculum for advanced learners that:

- Uses more basic or advanced reading, resources, and research materials.
- Applies ideas and skills to familiar or unfamiliar contexts that are similar or dissimilar from the ideas and examples explored in class.
- Encourages collaborations between students and adult experts in an area of shared interest.
- Develops solutions, proposals, or approaches that bridge differences in perspective and address relevant problems.
- Searches for useful connections among related or seemingly different elements (music and medicine, or law and geography).
- Looks for patterns of interactions in different areas of connection (e.g., ways in which geography, economics, politics, and technology tend to affect one another).
- Seeks out and evaluating unstated assumptions that are beneath the surface of decisions, approaches, etc.

The idea of Ascending Intellectual Demand can become an instructional tool for assisting teachers in providing the optimal level of challenge in curriculum and instruction to meet the merging needs and abilities of all students as they progress from one level to the next in their journey from novice to expert. Overall the concept suggests that high level, concept-based, meaning-focused curriculum and instruction should be given to the vast majority of learners, and that such curriculum should be extended for highly capable learners in terms of persistent movement toward expertise in one or more disciplines (Tomlinson et al., 2006). Coupling these ideas with those principles listed above are some of the ways educators can begin to ensure that advanced learners encounter challenge and to learn to accept, appreciate, and enjoy the work that it takes to continuously grow as a learner. This is what we did with Sam, who eventually earned his advanced degree in mathematics.

**References**


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Jann H. Leppien is the Margo Long Chair in Gifted Education, Center for Gifted Education, and Associate Professor in the School of Education at Whitworth University in Spokane Washington.
Preparing students with disabilities for life after high-school is an essential component of their education and educators have many opportunities to affect those outcomes. Every year approximately 6,500 students in Washington State who received special education services while in high school graduated, aged out at age 21, or dropped out of school. Of those students who responded to a survey one year after leaving high school, 3,236 students or 65.7% of them were attending postsecondary education, some type of training program, or were employed. Some were involved in two or more of these activities (14%). The differences between those who graduated high school and those who did not (i.e., aged out or dropped out) are striking. For students who did not graduate less than half were engaged in some type of post-school education or employment (44.7%). Strategies to support students with disabilities transition to positive post-school outcomes can be provided by educators in both elementary and secondary schools.

Prior to the passing of Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) in 1975, U.S. schools educated only one in five children with disabilities; today, more than 6.5 million youth ages 3 to 21 receive special education services through IDEA (U.S. Department of Education, 2011). Since the signing of the original act by President Ford in 1975, it has been amended and reauthorized six times. Beginning with the 1990 reauthorization of IDEA, transition services were added as a component of the Individual Education Program (IEP) to assist students with disabilities in their transition from high school to post-high school settings including education, training, employment, and independent living. The most recent reauthorization in 2004 added a new emphasis on post-school outcomes and “expanded the purpose of the law beyond that of merely requiring access to further require an emphasis on the measurement of outcomes for preparing children with disabilities for employment and independent living” (Alexander & Alexander, 2009, p. 562). Along with the reauthorization of IDEA in 2004, President Bush also signed into law the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) in 2002. His hope was to inspire a “new era in special education—one that doesn’t seek to meet minimum requirements, but rather embraces increased academic achievement and real results for every child with a disability” (U.S. Department of Education, 2002, p. 4). Together these laws no longer focus on access to education but on the outcomes for students with disabilities.

How do we measure outcomes for students with disabilities?

Assuring that students with disabilities complete high school is certainly a goal of teachers, school districts, and the communities, but is this the only measure of success? Are students with disabilities graduating at the same rate as their peers without disabilities? Are young adults with disabilities successful in finding and keeping a job or attending college after high school? Are they getting the services and supports necessary to be successful? The Center for Change in Transition Services (CCTS), a state-needs project funded by the Office of the Superintendent of Public Instruction, works with local school districts to answer many of these questions. In partnerships with local school districts, CCTS specifically analyzes data collected from students receiving special education services or their families to determine if these young adults were successful in obtaining post high school employment or education within one year of leaving high school. These rich data source provides information on employment demographics (i.e., average hours worked per week, wages, and setting) and postsecondary education and training demographics (i.e., program attended, completion of at least one term) as well as postsecondary support services students may have utilized.

The 2013 data collection for youth with disabilities exiting high school during the 2011-2012 school year shows that 65.7% of youth with disabilities are engaged in some type of postsecondary education or employment within one year of leaving high school (see Figure 1). However, this
also means that 34.3% of youth with disabilities (approximately 1,700 youth annually) are not engaged in any type of post high school education or employment. For those students with disabilities who did not graduate, 13.8% were attending postsecondary education or training, and 30.9% were employed. (see Figure 2).

**How do we improve outcomes?**

If we want students to be successful after high school, we need to make sure that they graduate, which means remaining in school, accruing credits towards graduation and perhaps more importantly, that they are engaged in school. The IEP team is crucial in developing a plan to assure that students are provided the services and supports needed to complete a course of study leading to high school completion. Aligning the student’s individual strengths, needs, interest, and preferences to the IEP and identifying the post-school goals is required by IDEA and is a process that optimizes student involvement, development of self-determination skills, and creates opportunities for the implementation of relevant curricula.

**What do educators need to know?**

Teachers generally know that all students receiving special education services have an Individualized Education Program (IEP) and one that is updated annually with new goals based on current assessments. Not all teachers may know that by age 16 a transition plan must be included in the IEP that identifies the student’s goals for life after high school. These goals address postsecondary education, training, and employment and are based upon annual transition assessments which include identifying students’ interests, strengths, preferences and needs.

Once the student’s interests, strengths, preferences, and needs have been determined the IEP Team then identifies transition services such as instruction, related services, community experiences, employment, or independent living skills that will facilitate the student’s movement from high school to post-school activities. The student’s course of study (i.e., a description of the coursework and activities) is also documented in the IEP and aligned to the student’s interests.

In addition to developing individual transition plans for students with disabilities school districts are also required to follow-up with their students who received special education services 1 year after graduating or dropping out of high school to determine if they are attending any postsecondary education or training program or are employed. School districts conduct surveys with former students and these data are analyzed and reported at the state, regional, and local level by CCTS. Data are then analyzed annually to determine areas of strengths and needs at the state, regional and local level for the purpose of program improvement.

**What can educators do to improve outcomes?**

With the emphasis on outcomes, perhaps the most important thing that educators can do is become familiar with a student’s IEP, provide information and input into the development of the IEP, and be an active participant in the annual IEP meeting. With this information and involvement with the student receiving special education services, educators can assist them in identifying their strengths and interests as well as areas that are difficult for
them. Educators can encourage and support students in developing their advocacy skills by attending their IEP meetings. Even students at the elementary level can attend a portion of the meeting. They could introduce their family members to their teachers and share a goal they want to work on over the coming year.

At the secondary level educators should be knowledgeable of the student’s IEP and they should also know the student’s goals for life after high school. The information in the IEP, including the student’s areas of needs and strengths, provides rich opportunities to connect with students, to develop and implement relevant lessons, and continue to increase skills in self-advocacy and self-determination. By age 16 students with disabilities are required to participate in their own IEP meeting. Therefore it is important to prepare a student for this role. By the time a student is in high school, he or she should not only attend the meeting but lead the meeting as much as possible. There are curricula and programs to help students learn these skills (see http://www.seattleu.edu/ccts). These skills are necessary for access and success in college, training programs or employment.

Preparing young people for life beyond high school is often neglected in the increasingly busy school days of standards-based instruction and high-stakes testing. However, these seemingly competing interests are not mutually exclusive. By creating engaging lessons based on a student’s interest and aligned with academic standards, competencies necessary for the next environment can be integrated to ensure that all students are developing the transition skills needed to make the successful move to postsecondary education, training, employment, and independent living.

References

Sue Ann Bube is the director for The Center for Change in Transition Services. Over the past twenty years, Sue has been a classroom teacher in the areas of mathematics and special education. She is a National Board Certified Teacher and is earning her Doctorate in Educational Leadership with a specialization in Educational Administration.

Cinda Johnson, Ed.D. is an associate professor and the director of the graduate special education program at Seattle University. She is the principal investigator for The Center for Change in Transition Services. She is a national leader in the area of transition from high school to post-high school for young people with disabilities.
Attention: Classroom Teachers, School and District-Level Administrators, Instructional Coaches, Mentors, Teacher Leaders, and Professional Developers

Teaching quality has been defined as instruction that enables a wide range of students to learn, and it is the strongest school-related factor that can improve student learning and achievement. This 2-day institute is designed to provide opportunities for educators to absorb the major changes we face, as well as gain sound information and proven, practical strategies to help them make a difference in the lives of students.

Keynote Speakers

Dr. Jerry Weast, Partnership for Deliberate Excellence, former superintendent Montgomery County Schools

Myron Dueck, Consultant, Teacher, Okanagan Skaha School District, Penticton, BC

The RTI-PLC INSTITUTE is intended to:

1. PRESENT information from school and district teams from across Washington State that utilizes concepts and practices relative to Professional Learning Communities and Response to Intervention. Strands relate to Assessment, Common Core, Early Learning, English Language Learners, Instructional Strategies, Behavior/Social, Special Education, Specialized Programs, State/Federal Initiatives, TPEP Instructional Framework

2. INSPIRE institute participants to stay positive as they navigate change by networking with educators from around the state.

3. Provide time to PLAN with your team to begin or continue working together toward the implementation of strategies, programs, models and/or policies that increase student learning.

INSTITUTE SCHEDULE

Tuesday Program
- 7:30-8:00 – Check In, Coffee & Pastries
- 8:00-8:45 - Team Time
- 9:00-10:10 - General Session Keynote: Jerry Weast
- 10:20-11:30 - Concurrent Session One
- 10:30-12:30 - Lunch
- 12:30-1:40 - Concurrent Session Two
- 1:50-3:00 - Concurrent Session Three

Wednesday Program
- 7:30-8:00 – Check In & Coffee & Pastries
- 8:00-8:45 - Team Time
- 9:00-10:10 - General Session Keynote: Myron Dueck
- 10:20-11:30 - Concurrent Session Four
- 11:30-12:30 - Lunch
- 12:30-1:40 - Concurrent Session Five
- 1:50-3:00 - Concurrent Session Six

Registration information available at www.wsascd.org
It’s Monday morning and you dread opening your email. You have a child in your building who is engaging in the most challenging behaviors you’ve seen in your career. The staff, are looking to you, the building leader, for answers and solutions to this growing problem. Emails and in-person communication contain a tone of increasing frustration and demands for meetings. You’ve got to handle this situation quickly, with a clear plan, before things get worse.

This fourth grade student has received academic IEP (Individualized Education Plan) services since kindergarten, but in the past few months his escalating and intense behavior during academic times has become an increasing concern. Challenging behaviors include refusal, throwing supplies, shouting obscenities, and throwing furniture. The teacher is at her wit’s end and daily calls home regarding these issues are upsetting the parents. The situation is your top priority and as the administrator you wonder: What steps you should take to address this problem?

Challenging behavior in the school setting is defined as any behavior which causes a barrier to the learning of self or others. For most students, a school-wide positive behavior intervention system teaches and reinforces pro-social behaviors while preventing many negative or challenging behaviors (Horner, Sugai, Todd, & Lewis-Palmer, 2005; Scott & Caron, 2005). A smaller percentage of students need short-term targeted interventions such as social skills or anger management (Mitchell, Stormont & Gage, 2011). A still smaller fraction require intensive and individualized interventions which may or may not include special education services (Dunlap et al, 2010). This article will provide you, the building administrator, with a basic understanding of the response steps to follow when addressing the challenging behaviors of children receiving IEP services.

Children with challenging behaviors historically were and continue to be marginalized from schools, instruction and other settings. School staff may unconsciously view challenging behavior as an offensive violation of their deeply held social norms.

These views inadvertently result in the responsibility for addressing the problem behaviors shifting away from staff to you the building administrator, for an immediate solution. Your response(s) should empower you and your staff to systematically address the needs of the child in question while maintaining procedural fidelity.

First and foremost keep in mind that children with IEP’s have protections under IDEA (Individuals with Disabilities Act, 1997). These protections outline the legal responsibilities of special education to address children’s challenging behaviors, reduce their barriers to educational access and ensure them a FAPE (Free and Appropriate Public Education; Yell & Katsiyannis, 2000). It is possible to use strategies in cases like the situation described previously which allow staff to maintain compliance with IDEA regulations while producing lasting and positive behavior change. These strategies are developed and implemented based on the model of Positive Behavior Support or PBS.

Positive Behavior Support

The PBS model assists teams with the assessment and planning of interventions to address challenging behaviors (Dunlap, Iovannone, Wilson, Kincaid, & Strain, 2010). In the absence of the PBS mindset the child is viewed as the behavior problem (e.g. she is defiant). Alternatively, the PBS model describes the child as having a problem (e.g. she has a problem with following directions). PBS frames a child as an individual who is having a problem rather than a child who is the problem. The PBS view removes the blame from the child and redefines the situation to one requiring instructional interventions (O’Neill et al., 1997). While most staff are comfortable planning instructional interventions to address academic problems, their approach to behavior problems may differ. Based on the belief that behavior problems are volitional or the result of poor parenting, teams respond to behaviors with punitive measures rather than instruction (Scott et al., 2005). Using PBS procedures guides teams to address behavior problems as instructional targets that can successfully be addressed. The complete list of steps and tools used in the
PBS process and the resulting documents to be included in the IEP are listed in Figure 1. This flowchart can assist the administrator to guide teams through the steps of the PBS process.

**Process: Step by Step**

**Functional Behavior Assessment**

A Functional Behavior Assessment (FBA) is the first tool used in the PBS process to address a child's challenging behaviors. Beginning in 1997 the FBA was legally mandated to protect the rights of the IDEA-eligible child. This process helps teams determine the purpose(s) or “function” of a child’s behavior which is determined by its relationship to environmental predictors and consequences. FBAs can help teams make educated guesses about what maintains the problem behavior. For example, consider the child who tantrums during math time resulting in him being placed in time out. Through the FBA, the team determines that this behavior occurs in a certain setting (math) and allows the student to escape the task demands of math (Regan & Michaud, 2011). Armed with this information, the team plans function-based interventions specific to math class. These might include intensive skill instruction, a change in grouping or altering task difficulty. The team may also include a consequence strategy such as allowing a break for work completed. Interventions based upon assessed function have been shown to be more effective than using universal interventions (McIntosh, Brown & Borgmeier, 2008; O’Neill et al., 1997). The FBA is informed by assessment data and input from key stakeholders including educational staff and parents or caregivers. FBA components, descriptions, and purposes are detailed in Table 1.

Table 1 indicates that data collection activities are a critical component of the FBA process. Decisions should not be based upon group discussion alone. The administrator can support the FBA process by helping teams (1) focus on one or two well-defined behaviors, (2) define the behaviors instead of labeling the child, (3) encourage all voices to be heard, (4) identify sources of assistance for selecting and designing data collection tools, (5) monitor attitudinal barriers that may exist (Scott et al., 2005), (6) remember that the FBA precedes an intervention plan, (7) create an individualized rather than “boiler plate” plan and (8) engage in the process early to prevent more intense difficulties (Scott, Liaupsin, Nelson & McIntyre, 2005). Your strong leadership is critical to ensuring that the FBA process is followed. A quality FBA based upon legitimate and careful assessment will lead to the development of an effective behavior support plan.

The FBA process is often foreign and difficult for general education staff to embrace. The technical FBA terminology and less than adequate pre and in-service training makes implementation of the FBA process difficult (Scott, Alter, & McQuillan, 2010). Obtaining high quality training for your general and special education staff can head off potential problems later. Training should address behavioral theory, legal requirements, assessment procedures, data collection tools, and interventions addressing hypothesized functions. It is far better to train first rather than defend an inadequate plan later.

**Positive Behavior Intervention Plan**

Following the completion of the FBA and the identification of the hypothesized function, the team will begin to draft the Positive Behavior Intervention Plan (PBIP). The hypothesized function informs the plan

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**Figure 1. FBA and PBIP Decision Making Flow Chart**

The hypothesized function informs the plan...
and strategies the team will recommend. The primary purpose of the PBIP is to develop and teach replacement behaviors, allowing the child to use new behaviors that will serve the same “function” as the old challenging behavior. The new behaviors should be easy for the student to do, acceptable to everyone, and gain access to reinforcement quicker than the “old” behaviors.

Like the FBA, the key stakeholders for the PBIP should include instructional staff and family or caregivers (O’Neill et. al, 1997; Reagan & Michaud, 2011). The components of the PBIP are defined and described in Table 2.

The administrator assists the team by (1) encouraging staff to consider prevention through changes to the environment, instruction and presentation, (2) keeping the team focused on behaviors to be replaced, (3) assisting the team to create replacements that will meet the same function, (4) reminding the team that the purpose is to teach new behaviors rather than eliminate the “old” ones and (5) ensuring that everyone’s voice is heard. This is critical, as parents or guardians are often the recipients
of documents rather than co-creators of them (Tucker & Schwartz, 2013).

The team should include anyone who may or will be implementing any part of the behavior plan including general educators. In addition, the team may need to include a staff or outside member who has specialized training in behavioral intervention for intensive behaviors (Benazzi, Horner & Good, 2006). Benazzi et al. (2006) found that interventions designed by behavior specialists paired with school based teams were effective in creating technically adequate behavior support plans. The next step in the process is to meet and amend the IEP before implementation occurs. Refer back to Figure 1 for the steps in the process.

**Next Steps: Amend, Implement and Revisit**

The finalized FBA and PBIP should be added to the IEP through an amendment process with implementation of the plan beginning immediately. Once the plan is implemented administrators can provide leadership in a number of ways. They can support teams and the fidelity of the process by (1) ensuring ongoing data collection, (2) participating in meetings to review the plans effectiveness, and (3) providing professional development that will enable staff to skillfully implement the planned interventions. Supporting plan implementation will build capacity for future assessments, plan development and interventions (Chandler, Dahlquist, Repp & Feltz, 1999).

**Avoiding Pitfalls**

School teams inevitably vary in their skill and knowledge regarding the steps for addressing behavior while maintaining fidelity to the process. Adhering to a clear set of procedures helps teams avoid errors as well as poorly written or implemented plans. While there are many potential problems typically encountered in this process, the most common pitfalls to avoid involve team composition and decision making.

**Placement Before or Without Evaluation**

The first pitfall is making placement decisions outside of the IEP team process. Statements of any type recommending a program or placement change should occur only in the context of evaluation data. Placement can be considered only after an initial or re-evaluation to determine the child's instructional needs has occurred. As the administrator, advise your staff to avoid defining a solution before they have defined the problem. The key message to send at all times is “follow the process.” The team should follow the steps as outlined in Figure 1 to develop or revise the FBA and PBIP based upon data collection and team collaboration before making any other decisions regarding program or placement. The PBIP should be implemented to determine the effectiveness of the interventions.

**Team Members**

Another pitfall includes failing to have the right team members at the table. A well-developed FBA and PBIP will need to include multiple relevant voices so that everyone is informed, has input into the process and can claim ownership of the team’s recommendations (McIntosh & Av-Gay, 2007). There are several key considerations when assembling the team. Be sure to include the service providers who will likely implement the plan. Failure to include these key members could lead to a lack of implementation or inadequate planning. A team may be tempted to ask an outside behavioral consultant or staff behavior specialist to assess and write the documents for the team rather than working in tandem with the group. If at all possible this should be avoided. Plans created by consultants or specialists alone are not as contextually relevant as ones created by a team with the specialist’s partnership (Benazzi et al., 2006). In addition plans

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Component</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Purpose(s)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Summary or Hypothesis</td>
<td>Statement from the FBA that describes factors maintaining the challenging behavior.</td>
<td>Links the FBA to the PBIP and assists with structuring interventions.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Statement</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Preventative Tactics</td>
<td>Adjustments to the environment, instructional arrangement, or other changes.</td>
<td>Preventative changes render the current challenging behavior irrelevant or less powerful.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Target Behaviors</td>
<td>Behaviors to be replaced or reduced with new behaviors.</td>
<td>Documents behaviors to be changed.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Replacement Behaviors</td>
<td>New behaviors to be taught and reinforced. Must meet the same need. In other words, if the child’s behavior is maintained by escape, these new behaviors must allow the child to do so. These behaviors need to be agreeable to all adults.</td>
<td>The PBIP includes new behaviors to be taught and reinforced. These behaviors should meet the same need as the “old” behaviors. This area is the plan for what to teach.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teaching and Reinforcement</td>
<td>A description of how the behaviors will be taught and reinforced.</td>
<td>New behaviors will not last or become permanent in the absence of instruction. This plan informs the teaching staff on the strategies and techniques for teaching skills. Reinforcement involves arranging the environment so that the new behaviors access what originally maintained the behavior (e.g. escape is a break earned for 10 minutes of on-task work with math).</td>
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<tr>
<td>Tactics</td>
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<tr>
<td>Statement from the FBA that describes factors maintaining the challenging behavior.</td>
<td>Links the FBA to the PBIP and assists with structuring interventions.</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Key members should be identified with instructional and monitoring responsibilities within this document.</td>
<td>Key members should be identified with instructional and monitoring responsibilities within this document.</td>
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**Table 2. PBIP Components, Description and Purpose**

![Table 2. PBIP Components, Description and Purpose](image-url)
written by someone else will always be “that person’s plan” rather than the team’s plan. This lack of ownership can be problematic. The expertise of a behavior specialist can and should be sought for children with severe behavioral challenges but should not usurp the team as a whole. Ensure that all general, special education, educational service associates, parents and specialists if needed are represented at the table to properly constitute a team for assessment and production of plans.

While there are many other potential pitfalls to avoid, the most important thing for you as the administrator is to understand and assist your team to follow the processes leading to effective plan implementation. Your ability to be the calm in the storm can guide a team to navigate the difficulties that children with challenging behaviors bring to the table. When you support your team to successfully follow the PBS process you will find it far less stressful to deal with those Monday morning emails.

Summary
Behaviors in the school setting present a difficult challenge to school teams as well as the administrators in charge. Administrators have the unique ability to provide leadership in a number of ways including supporting teams to follow processes in order to have clear and effective outcomes. As can be seen from this brief review, there are a number of considerations to keep in mind when supporting a team planning and designing interventions for students with challenging behaviors. The team should be convened before making any programmatic or placement recommendations. The FBA process should be viewed as the first step to address the current behaviors and as a preventative tool to avoid new and more intense ones from occurring. The team should be constituted of members who will not only implement the plans but who are key informants regarding the child’s behavior. This includes the parents or caregivers who provide socially important information about their preferences and home contexts. The team should be very familiar with FBA processes as well as the content that should be reviewed during assessment. Training for teams is recommended as well as partnership with a skilled behavior interventionist for severe cases. However the behavior interventionist should not independently create these plans—this should be a collaborative team effort. The PBIP should directly address the hypothesized function(s) from the FBA. There should be a focus on preventative, instructional and consequence strategies that are easy to implement, agreed to by all members and achievable by the child. Interventions should teach replacement behaviors that meet the same function as those targeted to replace along with a noticeable lack of punitive strategies. The team should receive training in specialized interventions and data collection to build capacity. IDEA has many requirements, among them the need for compliance with procedures. Your leadership goes a long way toward achieving this as well as guiding your team toward better decision making for every child with challenging behaviors.

References


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Laura Matson, Ph.D., is a Special Services Director at Puget Sound ESD. She has worked in public schools as a special education teacher, behavior intervention specialist, and special education administrator. She has also taught as an adjunct professor at the University of Washington and Pacific Lutheran University.
When teaching exceptional learners, specifically English Language Learners (ELL), teachers are more effective if they focus on deploying activities that address a wide range of learning styles and language comprehension abilities. This is especially true in today’s classroom where school communities are becoming increasingly diverse.

For example, many teachers have students who just moved to Washington and some of these students have limited ability to communicate in spoken and written English. Nevertheless, these students will be sitting next to native English speakers, which is an advantage since students new to English often learn more effectively if they are integrated into general education classes.

While there are numerous principles to follow for working effectively with ELL students, the real challenge for many educators is putting principles into practice. Obstacles associated with implementation are compounded when there are wide gaps between students who comprehend English more readily in comparison to those who need more time for processing. Nevertheless, I have found that creating and deploying activities to engage ELL students can be accomplished in many ways, even in the context of highly diverse settings. For example, I teach in an ELL class in Seattle, consisting of 20 students, representing six ethnicities. These students are designated ELL and receive services for different reasons. Two are foreign exchange students, while a few others receive services to support their individualized education plans. Some students are enrolled based on parent or guardian choice and still others are in class after completing a placement test and self-assessments. Some students have family roots in Washington, but others are new transplants from other countries, such as those from immigrant or refugee families. Just as their backgrounds vary, so do their particular needs in English instruction. Some students take general education classes, while others are in the process of being mainstreamed. Others speak English quite well, but struggle with comprehension. Others are extremely proficient in their native language, both in terms of communication and academic performance, but communicating in English is a real challenge.

Not unlike teachers in other disciplines, one of my goals is to prepare students for life outside of the schoolhouse. Achieving this goal requires an intermediate step, specifically, equipping students with basic survival English for full participation in general education classrooms. One activity for preparing students is the Literature Circle. I deploy literature circles later in the year, as students progress from fundamentals to application. Regardless of the stage, all of our efforts focus on mastery of English based on Washington’s English Language Proficiencies.

**Supporting English Language Learners with Literature Circles**

**Literature Circle**

The goal of literature circles is to promote student comprehension of fiction and nonfiction texts by cultivating 1) a supportive classroom environment, 2) collaborative conversation, 3) alternative communication methods, 4) vocabulary, 5) writing, and 6) reading activities. These principles show a positive effect on the learning of ELL students (Anthony, 2014) and a strong case can be made that the principles are readily activated in literature circles. While achievement of Washington’s English Language Proficiencies is key, literature circles also enable students to work cooperatively with peers for practicing social competency and exercise of their preferred learning style.

A key step to implementing an effective literature circle is selecting the text. An example reading passage suitable for secondary students is Eleven by Sandra Cisneros. The first sentence reads, “What they don’t understand about birthdays and what they never tell you is that when you’re eleven, you’re also ten, and nine, and eight, and seven, and six, and five, and four, and three, and two, and one.” It is easy to see from this brief sample that Cisneros engages students with content, along with inclusion of nuanced syntax and grammar. The overall effect is that the passage is accessible and entirely useful for teaching English.

1. The Discussion Director leads discussion and ensures the group is spending time communicating about the passage at hand. The most effective discussion directors are those who learn through verbal-linguistic or interpersonal approaches.
2. The **Illustrator** chooses a passage from the reading and makes an illustration of it. The illustration can be a drawing or a diagram, such as a graphic organizer or a Venn. This role is perfectly suited for visual-spatial learners.

3. The **Word Expert** chooses new, difficult, or interesting words, and then guesses at the definition using context clues. The word expert also defines words according to the dictionary. Analytical-type students are suited to the work of the word expert.

4. The **Passage Picker** chooses a passage of text that has some special meaning and shares insights with the group. Passage pickers often have a learning style that is intrapersonal or naturalist.

5. The **Summarizer** of course summarizes the main points of the story and consults with other group members to ensure the summary is thorough and concise. Those with logical-mathematical skill are often excellent summarizers.

Although the literature circle is intended to appeal to a broad range of students, and meet various needs in terms of unique learning styles, it may require flexible application and adjustment. Of course, this is the case for every instructional practice since each classroom situation is different. However, if there is one requirement for the activity, it is that the Discussion Director must demonstrate proficiency in comprehending the selected passage, along with effective interpersonal skills. At the same time, skills required for effective Discussion Directors can be taught, and are probably best thought of as part of the intended learning outcomes. The other roles in the group are readily assigned to a variety of learners and can be rotated to different students for interest sake. Figure 1 shows a set of directions for students as they implement their literature circle. Each role includes a specific set of questions or prompts to follow.

There are many ways students can read the passage, either before assembling in a circle or afterward. Passages can also be assigned as homework or integrated into whole-class instruction, depending on time and whether students will need in-class support. Once the circle is formed, the

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### Literature Circle Directions

Follow these steps for effective discussion:

1. **Discussion Director** (That’s you!)
   - a. Read your first prompt or question, and ensure everyone responds
   - b. Read and discuss the rest of your questions
   - c. This should take at least 5-10 minutes

2. **Illustrator** (____________________)
   - a. Ask the illustrator to show the picture, Venn diagram, or story map
   - b. Ask the group if they have questions for the illustrator
   - c. Ask “what would each of you have chosen to illustrate?”

3. **Word Expert** (____________________)
   - a. Have the Word Expert read the first word only
   - b. Have the group find the word in the story - Word Expert tells page
   - c. Each person in the group should guess what the word means
   - d. The Word Expert reads the dictionary definition
   - e. Ensure each word has been discussed for understanding
   - f. Do each word this way
   - g. This should take 10 minutes

4. **Passage Picker** (________________________)
   - a. The Passage Picker shares the passage and reasons for choosing it
   - b. All group members should find this passage in the story
   - c. Ask the group if they had a favorite passage they would have picked

5. **Summarizer** (_________________________)
   - a. The summarizer should share important points
   - b. Ask group members if they agree or disagree with the summary
   - c. If major points were missed, the summarizer should add them
   - d. Have the group decide on small details; put an x beside the details

### Making Connections Discussion Prompts

Ask the group if they have any connections to the reading and real life.

Share your connection, and ask other members more questions about it.

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*Figure 1.*
discussion may commence according to the order of assigned roles, as shown above, with the discussion director ensuring member participation. As circle members complete work for their role, the teacher may assign one student to ask a special set of questions which elicit connections between the passage and student real-world experience. At the conclusion of the “connection” phase, the teacher may again prompt students, but this time to complete a group assessment form as a method of peer evaluation. Results from these forms are used for reflection by the student, and as a future planning aid for the teacher. A sample group assessment form shows in Figure 2.

Literature circles promote growth in numerous academic competencies. However, there are other social outcomes that students practice along the way, not the least of which are cooperative learning, positive interdependence, group accountability, and group processing. To be sure, there are circumstances when clearly defined roles, engaging content, and clear directions are insufficient for overcoming challenges associated with dynamic group work. For example, it has been my experience that some groups talk over each other all at once. One solution to this problem is giving a “talking stick,” which students pass around to ensure everyone is heard. This reduces the flow of the discussion, but with practice the stick can be removed and regular literature circle rules reinstated. Another challenge emerges for those students who lack interpersonal communication skills. Again, one solution is to have these students write a brief reflection about their performance on the Group Assessment Form. Taking this approach enables the teacher to discern between shy students, and those who are reluctant to participate because of gaps in their understanding.

Finally, one way to extend literature circles is by engaging students in the process independently. For example, teachers can have students select a passage and then assume each of the five roles. Instead of a discussion, students record results in writing. Another extension, which sounds exotic but is becoming more achievable these days, is to have students convene a literature circle outside of regular school hours using Internet technologies such as Skype or Google Hangouts. Google Hangouts has the added benefit of permitting attendees to record their conversation, which can be viewed as a YouTube video by the teacher or peers sometime later.

Reference

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**Group Assessment Form**

*Please finish this form after your discussion!*

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<th>Always</th>
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<th>Rarely</th>
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<td>the discussion</td>
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<td>Group discussion stayed on topic</td>
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<td>Group members came prepared</td>
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What was the best thing about how your group worked?

What was one problem your group had?

How did you solve this problem?

Figure 2.
The Achievement Gap

Beginning in the late 70s, researches emphasized the need for educational equity and excellence to reduce the effects of socioeconomic status as a predictor of achievement. One of the groups established to contend with this challenge was the Equity and Excellence Consortium, founded at the University of Washington. Two questions used to guide the work of the Consortium have included 1) How do educators promote both equity and excellence? and, 2) How do educators communicate high learning standards for all students, while simultaneously accounting for different levels of readiness?

Since these initial efforts, along with significant amounts of research data compiled by the Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction, the achievement gap persists. It appears that reforms over the last few decades have not led the hoped for outcomes. The achievement gap between advantaged and disadvantaged students continues to be the norm rather than the exception.

Another set of challenges associated with the achievement gap are the numerous reforms deployed to close it. Two current examples include Common Core State Standards and Teacher Principal Evaluation Pilot. Many educators believe that these reforms are needed, and still others see these changes as an opportunity to engage students with subject matter in more meaningful ways, and at deeper levels. Nevertheless, the argument could be made that change is occurring in discrete initiatives producing results that are somewhat fragmentary. One way to think holistically about these changes is by focusing on student outcomes as schools reconcile various reform efforts.

Activities outlined in professional learning communities (PLCs) provide an effective place to begin an examination of how educators can unify their work, with student outcomes at the center. The PLC model presented by DuFour, Eacker, and DuFour (2005) shifts the focus to collaboration around student work, to answer some fundamental questions about teaching and learning, including

- What do we want all students to know and be able to do?
- How will we know if they know or can do it?
- What will we do when they know or can do it?
- What will we do if they do not know or cannot do it?

In classrooms that have closed the achievement gap, it appears that not only can educators answer these questions, but more importantly, systems have been established to ensure that students can articulate the answers. However, ensuring a cohesive system requires some understanding of the importance of each question and its place in the landscape of education reform.

Madeline Hunter was one of the first authors to consider the question of what do we want all students to learn, through her model of Instructional Theory into Practice, which emphasized the learning objective. Another benchmark work with regard to objectives was the meta-analysis conducted by Marzano (2006) demonstrating the efficacy of learning goals, which has facilitated some changes we observe in classrooms even today. For example, it is accepted practice to see learning objectives posted for student self-evaluation. The latest development with this practice is to see it on observation protocols for administrative walk-throughs. While clarifying the objective is an important first step for teachers and students, implementation has been partial producing a surface or first order change rather than the deeper second order change that educators and reforms are seeking.

Nevertheless, there is growing research to show that practices such as self-reflection predicated on a clear goals have a positive effect on learning. For example, Bransford et al. (2000) discuss how humans need to know the meaning of things; the why behind what we are doing and this suggests using goals, objectives, and targets to focus lessons and learning activities. After establishing the objective, self-assessment follows, which has been shown to increase capacity for metacognitive thinking, and personal connection to subject matter (Diamond & Hopson, 1998). Self-assessment, sometimes called self-regulated or metacognitive learning, also leads to enhanced engagement and academic performance, especially for students in need of additional support (Boykin...
Moss and Brookhart (2009) summarize the relationship between objective and self-assessment by stating that students who have a clear picture of the learning target and the performance criteria are likely to take needed steps to ensure their work measures up to expectations. Few doubt the logic behind aligning objectives with the activity of self-assessment, but compelling arguments have been made to think more broadly about learning outcomes and the cultivation of metacognitive thinking. For example, Ellis (2010) suggests transforming objectives with self-assessment into reflective assessments, such as writing “I Learned” statements for promoting student ownership of new knowledge and skills. Deploying reflective assessments links students to personal meaning and enables them to practice self-feedback. Some additional prompts for writing reflective assessments include “I feel…” “I think…” “I know”… “It isn’t yet clear….” Teachers deploying these kinds of prompts in the form of Entrance or Exit slips gather useful feedback information for making instructional decisions for individuals, small groups, and the entire class.

Another approach for summarizing learning with respect to the objective, while tapping metacognitive thinking, is a target sheet. A target sheet addresses what students need to learn, but also ensures that learning activities are connected to a comprehensible goal. Additional levels of organization may be accomplished by separating targets into units or quarters for communicating the big picture. Effective use of a target sheet includes students tracking their own progress, perhaps by using graphs or visual surveys, such as those shown in the Figures 1, 2 and 3. Self-tracking using visual methods serves as an efficient approach for communicating formative assessment information to the teacher as well.

A variation of the theme of reflective self-assessment is the backwards planning model proposed by Wiggins & McTighe (1998). As these authors suggest, the learning target can be taken to a deeper level by having students pose it as an essential question. Some essential questions for different subjects include Why grammar? What would life be like today if we had lost WWII? What if the Wenatchee and Columbia rivers had run dry during the night? How have mathematical concepts led to the development of cell phones? Essential questions are inherently more interesting than stated objectives, and they invite engagement because questions are posed for the purpose of articulating an answer. In addition, questions are no less amenable to communicating state or national standards and in this way satisfy the first PLC question, what students should learn.

Whether essential question or stated objectives, attending to the standards and engaging students in self-assessment requires diligence. One approach for those still acclimating to standard-based teaching and learning, and wanting accountability to incorporate the practices under discussion, may benefit by assigning one student as the “Target Master.” As the name suggests, this student is put in charge of making sure the class stays focused on the learning target at the beginning, middle, and end of the lesson. The Target Master also reminds everyone to reflect on the target by interpreting its meaning, importance, and their progress toward meeting it.

The corollary of providing students with a clear objective is ensuring they comprehend desired performance for meeting the objective. We have everyday experience with this concept, which makes it easy to apply in the classroom. For example, many students know exactly what it looks like to make that three-point shot during a basketball game or what is required to advance to the next level in the latest video game. Communicating expectations in a discipline means presenting students with criteria and models using rubrics, checklists, exemplars, and other artifacts that close the gap between current and desired performance. However, showing and telling is insufficient. Students need to take the next step by describing for themselves how a performance meets or exceeds expectations.

Objectives, evaluation criteria, and self-assessment are necessary components, but a learner’s sense of self-efficacy tends to mediate, and
learners to take on rigorous intellectual challenges. It can help develop growth mindset. In a schooling culture that inspires a daily practice. It can help develop growth targets, and charting and monitoring becomes operationalizing the learning targets and believing he had potential and that his hard work paid off. The seeds of a positive mindset had been planted.

Once students have target sheets for operationalizing the learning targets and their day-to-day work is linked with those targets, charting and monitoring becomes a daily practice. It can help develop growth mindsets in a schooling culture that inspires learners to take on rigorous intellectual challenges. Students who can answer the first two PLC questions build self-confidence about tasks and learn that it is effort and practice that lead to skill, knowledge, and academic success rather than simply being born with the "right stuff."

The next step, after clarifying objectives and initiating self-assessment strategies, is to take action when students perform below or above the desired level of performance. Responding to feedback is one strategy for contending with the question of what comes next by enabling teachers and students to focus taking steps for remediation. One source of feedback comes from assessments, which can also be tracked by students. Indeed, as Stiggins (1997) has stated, "engaging in self-assessment prior to receiving feedback… shifts the primary responsibility for improving the work to the student, where it belongs." This is certainly the case with practice assignments as well as assessments. Stiggins goes on to make the case that the process of feedback and assessment should be seamless and for improving learning: "we must assess accurately and use results effectively in order to make sure students react productively to the assessment results" (2004). One key to this approach is to have students respond to assessment results, not by doing the next assignment, but by engaging in further investigation, remediating gaps in performance, or accessing resources fixing-up their work. The seminal work by Black and Wiliam (1998) supports all of these conclusions. However, the path to realizing gains from effective feedback, coupled with assessment for learning and productive student response is difficult to achieve.

Nevertheless, taking some small steps to implement a system of seamless assessment envisioned by Stiggins (1997) and Black and Wiliam (1998) are readily available to educators. For example, Hattie (2009) summarizes results from numerous meta-analytic studies and provides a host of instructional practices that deepen our understanding of effective practices, not the least of which is feedback. According to Hattie (2009), feedback was most powerful when it engages students in answering questions about their own gaps in performance, where do I have errors, what are my misconceptions, why am I not more engaged in this unit?

If compelling research from Hattie (2009) is not enough, there are major reform efforts that are sure to inspire every educator, regardless of context or experience. For example, teacher evaluation frameworks from Marzano, CEL and Danielson, along with AWSP Leadership Criteria provide another clear set of objectives and descriptions of performance. Indeed, rubrics found in these frameworks describe many of the instructional practices and processes we strive to use with our own students. It is also helpful and inspiring that performance for teachers and principals be organized around essential PLC questions.

With regard to clear learning goals and promotion of self-assessment, CEL 5D indicates "the success criteria for the learning target(s) are clear to students… the performance tasks align to the success criteria… students refer to success criteria and use them for improvement” (Distinguished performance for standard P5). Similarly, the Marzano framework indicates that, "the teacher identifies important academic vocabulary specific to the lesson and makes students aware of the meaning of these terms… the teacher monitors the extent to which students have internalized the meaning of these terms using their own background knowledge” (Proficient performance for standard 2.5). Lastly, AWSP Leadership Criteria indicates that the principal is "proficient AND consistently demonstrates leadership in the practice of developing comprehensive student growth plans… regularly meets with faculty members to reflect on student growth… and assessment results of selected teachers show consistent academic growth of students” (Distinguished performance for standard 5.2).

By establishing systemic practices in which students answer the four PLC questions, we believe the achievement gap can be closed as well as help educators realize significant gains by embracing education reform, specifically new evaluation models. Additionally, the above strategies embed higher levels of transparency for all stakeholders throughout the instructional process from primary grades to the senior year. Families are not only given a clear mental model of what it looks like for their child to be meeting and exceeding standards but also accurate feedback on where the child is in relation to meeting the standards. Parents and students become valued as instructional partners. What would it look like if students, parents, and teachers could articulate the standard and where the student is in relation to meeting the standard? How might conferences look? How might making decisions about a student’s IEP plan look? How might daily instruction look? Perhaps the evidence of effectiveness would be
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Amber Birks is an instructional coach for the Wenatchee School District. She graduated with her Master’s in Educational Leadership and administrative credentials from Washington State University in 2013. She is Nationally Board Certified in ELA, and has 13 years of teaching experience. Shifting the ownership of data from adults to students has been a central focus of her work as an educator.

References
Differentiating for the Whole Class: Ten Principles for Effective Teaching

For many successful educators, supporting exceptional learners means differentiating curricula and instruction. While this approach is admirable and effective, I find that a significant obstacle is having enough time to plan individualized supports for adhering to the goal of differentiation. In a perfect world, there would be more teachers with fewer students, and more time to make specific adjustments for each of the individuals that come into a classroom. While I certainly do not dismiss the idea of differentiation, I have found that taking a broad approach is effective given the nature of the students I teach and the limited amount of time I have in which to teach them. Specifically, I plan lessons, select instructional methods, and deploy assessments based on principles of effective teaching to raise achievement and preserve the social-moral fabric of the classroom.

Preparing for diverse learning preferences. I have a deep interest in understanding how students develop and learn, and I pride myself on incorporating my knowledge on the current and emerging theories of cognition and development into my daily practice. I understand that very few students actually acquire lasting, usable knowledge if instruction is irrelevant or unsupported according to the different ways knowledge and skills are cultivated. For me, this means lessons must utilize multiple instructional strategies that together are able to meet the needs of a wide range of students. For example, learning activities incorporating physical engagement benefit students with kinesthetic preferences. Verbal and linguistic learners benefit from whole class and small group discussions. Visual learners benefit from questions, models and video clips being projected on the classroom screen. Intrapersonal and interpersonal students benefit from the opportunity for both individual and group responsibilities. Application of multiple instructional strategies promotes success for all students.

Ensuring respect, safety, and value. The first principle is ensuring students feel respected, safe and valued. I treat my students with dignity while insisting on high standards of work and conduct from all classroom participants. I never communicate that mastery of subject matter is beyond the reach of any student. At the same time, I deploy activities for remediation when they are needed, such as inviting students in after class for extra help, periodically reviewing assignments, and organizing students into peer-assisted study groups. As a result, I know that with effort, any student can be successful in the classes I teach.

Planning efficient, organized, and coherent lessons. All students are more successful in a class in which activities are planned in a logical order, from simple to more complex, with a clear beginning, middle and end (Marzano, 2007). Within the lessons I plan, the outcomes, activities, materials, methods and grouping of students are aligned. Additionally, I incorporate different rates of activity, from slow and steady reflection to frenetic production. My intent is to alternate the pace at least every 10 minutes. Brain research suggests that people of all ages tend to lose focus after 10 minutes and need alternative stimulation (Medina, 2008). Alternating the pacing provides stimulation and gives students a sense of progress.

Facilitate autonomous thinking. I favor activities in which students are cognitively active, such as class discussion. Discussion encourages students to explore, develop and express their own ideas, while processing other points of view. Research on learning suggests that discussion is superior to lecture for promoting higher-order thinking skills such as analysis, evaluation, and synthesis (Caram & Davis, 2005). The assumption is that when students actively and cooperatively develop knowledge, understanding, attitudes and behaviors, they are more apt to retain these attributes than if they had received them passively.

Three techniques for facilitating autonomous thinking include wait time, redirecting, and complete ideas. For me, wait time means withholding immediate responses to encourage student thinking. Redirection is helpful when a student asks me a question while working with a group, I respond with, “ask each other” and remain nearby as students derive answers with their peers. Last, requiring complete ideas from students as they respond reduces the likelihood of an incomplete answer. Sentence frames helpful for prompting
Thoughtful questioning. I utilize strategic questioning in order to guide and build student understanding of concepts. I often prepare questions in advance, which allows me to focus on what the students are doing during the lesson, not what I am going to say next. Prepared questions help me address common misconceptions, allow for easier success for some students and deeper challenges for others. Once a question has been posed, I use think-pair-share and other quick activities to activate student memory of background knowledge or to practice responses with a peer before sharing with the class.

Make learning positive and fun. I like to infuse my lessons with fun. No matter the level of student achievement or ability, when the students are enjoying themselves, their mental states are receptive for learning. When I am having fun, obviously enjoying the content or structure of a lesson, the students will mirror my interest and enthusiasm. Not every second of every lesson has to be fun. Brief interludes of humor, movement, song or story are sufficient. In my class, a review dance is one way I incorporate fun. My students and I have choreographed the major ideas from each unit of study, which over the course of the school year evolves into a longer and longer review dance. The dance adds novelty and fun to the class structure, while helping students recall information from the entire course sequence.

Justify and explain instruction to students. I never want my students to wonder why we are doing an activity. I like to explain the logic behind any activity, rule, expectation, or assessment. I have found that students are more cooperative if they understand each lesson segment, which requires a brief rationale and clear expectations. For example, in a recent lesson, I recall saying “the reason I’m having you do that is that it forces you to talk to each other, and also to look at your notes and to find gaps in your knowledge that you might need to fill.” And again, “the reason we are going to do this is because not only is it important in our class, but scientists, practicing scientists of all kinds, in medical or research fields, data analysis, all use this technique.” And finally, “Do not talk for the first 15 seconds. You’ve got to give yourself time to process the question and come up with an answer.”

Catching them on-task. Another strategy I use to challenge students is catching them on task by cold calling. Cold calling usually means students are unsure when they will be called on to respond and this tends to promote attention. In my class, cold calling is not used as a “gotcha” for off task behavior. Rather, it is used as a way to systematically check for understanding among students, which is necessary for raising achievement (Black & Wiliam, 1998). I call on students of all abilities to respond to a question, informally assessing comprehension of the content at hand. While cold calling, I encourage show-of-hands if others want to respond. Moving seamlessly between calling on students with raised hands and cold calling encourages participation and distributes talk-time across the class.

Enabling choice. Students in my class have opportunities to make choices about their learning. Choice promotes students’ sense of autonomy, positive behavior, and self-motivation. For example, within my DNA model assignment, students have choice about their partner and the amount of detail to include. Students pick and choose from a menu of options to include in their model (without limit to the number of options they select). Students with varying levels of skill and background knowledge have equal access to content, along with exercise of creativity.

Sampling performance with multiple assessments. I value the fact that all of my students have unique talents and gifts, and operate from varying levels of skill, knowledge, and dispositions toward learning. The conclusion of this reality is that a variety of assessment techniques are required for valid evaluation of performance, whatever the subject matter at hand. Some methods I use for collecting information for making decisions about students and instruction include 1) teacher talks, 2) self-assessments, and 3) pretests.

Teacher talks are informal chats with colleagues who have taught my students in previous courses. I ask questions such as, “have students been exposed to this content before? What have they learned in the past? What details were not included in the instruction?” I will also talk with teachers about individual students for identifying supports.

Student self-assessments come in a variety of forms, but one I have found most effective is the questionnaire with Likert-scaled items such as “I am familiar with this content” and “I know where to go for help” or “I don’t have many questions about what we are studying.” While students may not accurately assess their performance all the time, the results do engage the metacognitive domain and provide useful information for planning instruction. Finally, pretests are content specific tests which include items assessing student knowledge and skill of up-coming subject matter. While results of pretests are not graded, they do yield insights about students’ background knowledge and misconceptions. Pretests are also useful for cueing students to content we will emphasize in proceeding lessons.

The ten instructional practices presented here help me differentiate lessons to support all learners. While each teacher approaches differentiation according to the particular needs of students, I have found that writing lesson plans, selecting methods of instruction, and deploying multiple approaches to assessment - aligned with sound principles of teaching and learning – achieve the goal of differentiation.

References

Gretel von Bargen is a biology teacher at Skyline High School. She has earned National Board certification, and received the Presidential Scholar Teacher Recognition Award, Sammamish “SAMMI” educator of the year award, and has been nominated for Washington State Teacher of the Year. Gretel was recently selected as a finalist for the Presidential Award for Excellence in Math and Science Teaching.
Introduction

Art Club is at the Museum of Northwest Art. We are attending for the fifth time in two years. The group is a mix of students who have attended before and newcomers to the museum setting. The volunteer docent is leading a group of mostly fourth grade boys in an activity called Visual Thinking Strategies (VTS) where the students will look at the art work, in this instance a painting, and describe what they see. The boys are before a large 60” x 120” painting on a white field. There are seven anamorphic shapes on the field, gestural and stark.

“I see aliens! They have sort of heads and see! Some arms or legs or whatever.”

“Yes! They are aliens but also are people or dancers, they are moving and are like this,” the student drops into a crouch.

“So you are saying that these shapes,” the docent gestures in front of the canvas, “resemble human or alien forms, and they could be dancing. What do you see that makes you say that?”

Art club is comprised largely of Hispanic students. Many of the boys before the painting are speaking in their second language (L2), in an environment they have been in for the first time. There is a particular atmosphere in a museum, one of history and a sort of reverence, and the art clubbers have intuited how to behave and engage appropriately. But they are also excited to talk and discuss the art work. Much of the success of the program is the use of VTS, which elicits response from the viewer with a simple sentence, What is going on in this picture?, inviting open ended response. As I listen, I am struck by the boys’ engagement in the VTS experience and the amount of content-related language they are producing. It makes me aware of the power of oral language as a form of language acquisition while discussing art.

The Importance of Oral Language Development for English Language Learners

Nearly everyone begins learning language orally. As young children, our linguistic world is built primarily through speaking and listening. However, in school systems, the opposite is true. The opportunity to acquire a language through spoken interaction is greatly reduced. Especially at the higher grades, students are expected to produce language, often in written form, that is content specific and is rooted in abstract concepts. “In one study, Arreaga-Mayer and Perdomo-Rivera (1996) found that ELLs spent only 4 percent of the school day engaged in school talk and 2 percent of the school day discussing focal content of the lesson” (Zwiers, 2011, p. 8). What’s more, academic language is abstract, and may not relate to any immediate surroundings. For English Language Learners there are great challenges in succeeding academically in such an environment.

To help them meet the challenges of academic output, students, particularly ELLs, should have far greater opportunities for oral discussion. Studies of middle-school-aged students noted a significant correlation between strong oral language skills and English literacy (Genesee & Riches, 2006; Geva, 2008). The recent trend in education places English Language Learners into content coursework, and in that setting they are expected to simultaneously learn content along with language. Additionally, Common Core standards require students engage in analysis of subject areas, including abstracted and content-specific vocabulary. For ELLs to learn in school under these conditions, they must have the opportunity to connect the language and content to their own background knowledge, and process it through student-generated activities and discussions (Schleppegrell, Achugar, & Oteiza, 2004). Oral language is contextual, immediate and relevant. Providing opportunities for ELLs to process their thoughts through listening and speaking provides another layer of language acquisition when students need to produce academic work.

Processing thoughts in a new language can be terrifying. Lowering the affective filter allows students to be comfortable, and ELLs should be supported in the classroom by providing safe oral language opportunities to develop language proficiency (Purdy, 2008). Indeed, “ELLs need opportunities for extended conversations with knowledgeable language users in order to develop the high level of academic language necessary for school success” (Levine & McCloskey, 2011, p 101). To alleviate the stress of producing
language, talking about concrete objects, such as images, is less anxiety-provoking for students, as the topics being discussed are visually referenced. Taking a page from art education, using visuals provides a concrete place to start discussion in any content. It elicits the students’ own wonderings, and naturally scaffolds by building language opportunities through discussion.

How VTS Can Support Oral Language Development

A simple, yet effective way to begin discussing visuals is using Visual Thinking Strategies (VTS). The protocol asks two questions of the viewer, What’s going on in this picture? and What do you see that makes you say that? Both of these questions are comprehensible to nearly all levels of language learner. After the viewer shares their observations, the instructor facilitates by paraphrasing the viewer’s thoughts, interweaving key vocabulary. For example, students might be asked to take a moment to look at a painting of a landscape, which depicts a field with sheep grazing. After a quiet moment, the instructor asks for volunteers to share what they see. Students will have a variety of responses, such as “I see green hills.” The instructor will then ask, “What do you see that makes you say that?”

The student may go on to describe that the green reminds them of grass, and the way the green is painted in a curve looks like a hill. Here is where the instructor has an opportunity to interweave vocabulary. They may paraphrase by saying, “So our student sees a field, and the color of the field looks like grass.” At this moment, the instructor indicates the area of the painting that is being discussed so all students may see the connection. “The color reminds our student of a field, which was described as a hill, perhaps because of the curved shape of the green field.” Here the instructor is presenting vocabulary in the context of the visual, using and extending the student’s own words.

VTS has been used to anchor many museum education programs with great success (Adler, 2006, p.34). The protocol has been used in classrooms as well, and even adopted as school wide programs. An urban arts infusion program in Michigan decided to implement a school wide integration of VTS as a model for student-centered inquiry (Charland, 2011). One peer coach noted about the program implementation, “[VTS] really has had an impact, because it’s making the kids look closely at things… they are using those higher level thinking skills automatically” (Charland, 2011,p.11).

VTS Promotes Higher Level Thinking

The VTS model asks the teacher to paraphrase, and the students’ own observations and ideas center the discussion. As stated by Philip Yenawine (1998), talking about art objects “pull[s] you in with visual appeal but perplex[es] you once engaged” (p.318). Yenawine (1998) goes on to state that repeated viewings don’t necessarily recreate the same experience for the viewer. In this way, the model provides meaningful learning, where the student is bringing self to the visual. Asking open-ended questions around visuals promotes higher order thinking and provides opportunities for problem solving. Additionally, such questioning is beneficial to ELLs as vocabulary is enhanced since student can bring perspectives from home culture into the analysis (Richards & Anderson, 2003, p. 443).

VTS Builds Deeper Comprehension

Beyond engaging students in offering an opportunity to practice oral language, VTS scaffolds language acquisition by giving the viewer a concrete object to talk about. The viewer shares their observations, and during prolonged viewing more is observed. At this moment, the viewer is participating in making his or her own meaning and interpretation of what is viewed. The VTS protocol acts as a guide through this visual process, particularly for students using a new language, which has proven successful in guiding the viewer into deeper critical thinking. According to Curva et al. (2004), and Longhenry (2005), engaging in VTS has shown that students “learn more quickly, have greater comprehension skills, and are more capable of expressing whole concepts and completing whole thoughts in a sentence” (Landorf, 2006, p. 30). Considering that much of today’s information is garnered through images, particularly for youth, education about what is seen becomes vitally important.

When learning a language, the mind begins by labeling the world around it, and then builds comprehension of thoughts, feelings and concepts. Discussing and describing a visual allows for the same trajectory; it has the ability to be both concrete and abstract. Visuals also have the ability to generate an immediate sensory, emotional response (Adler, 2006; Richards & Anderson, 2003). Rather than only reporting on what is seen, exploring the greater meaning and context of what is seen connects mere immediate response to an in depth exploration of meaning and emotional response to the visual world.

VTS Applies to Visuals Beyond Art

The VTS protocol has the ability to be generalized to other visual forms beyond art work. Guided Language Acquisition Design (GLAD), a popular instructional approach for ELL teachers developed by the Orange County Department of Education, has been gaining popularity and has an emphasis on making learning visual (Larson-Everson et al., 2012). With the goal of high quality instruction for all students, the Project GLAD overview (2012) states that “the model enhances teachers’ design and delivery of standards-based instruction through an integrated approach” (What is Project GLAD). GLAD lessons often use pictorial representations of concepts for scaffolding to make learning more comprehensible. VTS provides an additional strategy for viewing any visual for content areas.

Photographs, illustrations, even charts and graphs could employ the same approach as an initial analysis and entrance into topics. For example, when looking at illustrations in a science textbook, the illustrations have been chosen or created mindfully to accompany the text. Asking the students before they read the text, “share with a partner, What is going on in this picture?” gives the students a chance to examine and study the illustration, make observations, and speak to each other. Following up with “What do you see that makes you say that?” requires the students to provide evidence for what they see. Revisiting the pictures with the same questions after reading the text allows for greater insight into the illustration as well as the text. Also, if the visuals do not appear to connect to the text, that is in itself an interesting conversation. Much can be gained from giving the illustrations more than a
A cursory glance. As a comprehension strategy, reading pictures is an insightful tool for students struggling with text.

**Conclusion**

Young children acquire language naturally and orally through interactive experience. For newcomers learning English, schools should embrace how first language is acquired and replicate that in the classroom. As schools develop greater rigor and demand for academic achievement, language learners in particular are at risk of falling behind their peers. Providing opportunities to practice and build oral language is imperative as our academic expectations deepen. By using the VTS protocol, students have the opportunity to develop oral language which in turn increases vocabulary and lowers the affective filter. Educators do well to look to child language development, where “the language environment of the young child is one where language is not separated from learning about the way the world operates” (Levine & McCloskey, 2013, p.23).

Back at the museum, the art club students are asked to write a reflection about one of the art works they viewed today. Three fourth grade boys are back in front of the canvas that compelled them to speak earlier, and are discussing what they saw. One of the boys sums up the experience by observing,

“I like this painting. I have a lot to say about it.”

**References**


Angela Anderson is an art enrichment specialist at the Dual-Language School West View Elementary in Burlington, Washington. She trained in VTS strategies with the MoNA Link program at Museum of Northwest Art. In June she will graduate with her Masters in Literacy at Western Washington University.
Many people already have their own idea of the stereotypes regarding highly capable or gifted education and the students who attend highly capable program classes. Some people cringe at the words, envisioning what they may see as an “elitist” program that puts some students above others according to performance on a certain test (or tests). Some people may hold their head up high and smile inside at the thought of such a program because they are proud of accomplishments the students in their programs have had or they know someone personally in a program and they appreciate this educational opportunity.

And yet both advocates and opponents of highly capable may be surprised to hear that school districts across Washington have not effectively served highly capable students or provided true highly capable program support in many cases. One reason for this is that most of the programs identified as “highly capable” are usually acceleration-based classes, taught by teachers who are untrained in highly capable education. Indeed, those involved in gifted education generally observe that the models used in Washington are operating in less-than-optimal ways. These challenges are intensified with misnomers, misconceptions, and misunderstandings of what highly capable students are and are not. Some go further and suggest that we have created an unnecessarily divisive and inequitable system that needs an overhaul.

In order to discuss this topic effectively it is necessary to understand some definitions. First, educators and lawmakers in Washington use the term “Highly Capable” to mean gifted students. In fact, our state laws label these students using both terms, for example the endorsement (available but not required in Washington as it is in many states) for teachers of highly capable students is called the “Gifted and Talented Education endorsement.”

According to WAC 392-170-035, highly capable individuals are “students who perform or show potential for performing at significantly advanced academic levels when compared with others of their age, experiences, or environments.”

Washington State’s recent inclusion of highly capable education under the Basic Education Act resulted in many new administrative code requirements, such as recognizing that there are two types of gifted individuals—those who are already performing at a high level, and those who are capable of performing at a high level. In other words, the terms “Highly Capable” and “High Performing” are not always mutually exclusive and they cannot be assumed to be the same thing.

Sometimes people say “but all kids are gifted.” This is inaccurate because not all students possess highly capable traits. “Highly capable” and “gifted” are technical terms that describe people with specific characteristics that impact the way they think and respond to stimuli. They are specific people with special needs and distinct challenges that deviate from the normal distribution of performance. They are also students who exhibit asynchronous development and who often have social and emotional gaps or over-excitabilities that need specific interventions in order to optimize learning and interactions (Rivero, 2005).

According to the specific definitions and supports needed, gifted education is often categorized as a particular track of special education. One reason for this is that gifted education involves social and emotional factors, along with assessment of talents and skill areas in various content areas. Nevertheless, while these definitions suggest homogeneity, it is necessary to make a distinction between highly capable versus “high performing.” Some gifted individuals perform at high levels while others do not, and both groups are capable of excelling with effective and intensive interventions.

Gifted students who are underperformers can catch up with their non-gifted or gifted-high-performing counterparts but there are specific things these students require in order to achieve their full potential. As a result, it is necessary that parents, teachers, and administrators support high and low-performing gifted students, otherwise some may slip through the cracks and dropout or find other ways to use their intellect.

The challenges surrounding gifted education are certainly not isolated to...
Washington State. These challenges exist across the nation. In fact, cases against school districts across the United States are being litigated for inequitable access to gifted programs for students from diverse backgrounds. For example, in Chicago a school district was sued because Hispanic students did not have access to the district’s gifted program. The district was required to redesign their program to include diverse highly capable students and to review their practices (Krishnamurthy, 2014).

Educators in Tacoma are aware of the issues regarding inequitable access to highly capable programs and higher level achievement courses and are working hard to remedy the situation in coordination with the new state laws. We recognize that we need to make changes immediately in order to better serve our students and to provide access to appropriate program options to those who need support.

One of the most troubling elements associated with delivering gifted education in large urban areas is ensuring equal opportunity for ethnically diverse or lower income students (Ford, Grantham, & Whiting, 2008). Research shows that giftedness exists across all ethnicities and there is no more prevalence of gifted characteristics in any one particular group. Giftedness exists in all socio-economic levels and there are many gifted individuals who experience life circumstances that may prohibit reaching their full potential. Indeed, this reality is acknowledged in Washington Administrative Code, which states “[Gifted] students are present not only in the general populace, but are present within all protected classes…” (WAC 392-170-035).

Although WAC makes gifted education seem clear, it is rather difficult to identify gifted students, especially if the traits of a highly capable student are misunderstood. Gifted students with high intellect sometimes mask their abilities for various reasons. For example, students may not want to stand out from their peers, or high achievement may not be culturally popular. Gifted students may underperform by dropping high level classes, not handing in homework, not trying hard on tests, or exhibiting behavior problems.

Alternatively, some gifted students show another set of behaviors which may be misinterpreted. For example, some students ask a lot of questions, get bored if they are not constantly stimulated with new information, think at a rapid pace, and are seen as having a hard time talking with those who cannot keep up with the random way they connect their thoughts. These types of traits can appear to be behavior problems to teachers or administrators who do not understand the nature and needs of highly capable kids. In some cases, a teacher may even reprimand a student who is highly capable as the result of misdiagnoses.

Educators in the Tacoma School District began examining these issues in-depth to find a better way to reach students in all demographic areas. Specifically, we analyzed statistics showing some patterns of misalignment in serving highly capable students. In addition, leaders examined data from the Office of Civil Rights (OCR), which provides statistics regarding race and ethnicity classifications for students in highly capable programs. OCR has recommended that gifted programs replicate a district’s general population, within a 20% variance. What this meant in Tacoma was having a gifted program with approximately 20% African American students, and 10% Hispanic students, among other races. In addition, students enrolled in gifted programs should come from diverse regions and neighborhoods in the city.

The imbalances between gifted services in Tacoma’s different neighborhoods were also easy to observe. Even just two years ago our district was providing ten (one day a week “pull-out” model) classes of “JAWS” gifted services to students in the north half of our city and only two JAWS classes for the south half. There were six full-time (five days a week) “SAIL” and “GATE” classes in the north end and only one SAIL class in the entire south half of our city. The majority of our students in our highly capable elementary school programs were Caucasian and the areas of our city with the highest percentages of students attending our programs were our city’s higher income area neighborhoods.

I met with other educational leaders in Tacoma and we began investigating these trends and identified several reasons for why they had emerged. First we noticed that we were not receiving many referrals from parents or teachers located in the south half of the city for students testing into the gifted program. One reason for this was that many teachers and parents said they were unaware of the referral process. Alternatively, some parents said they did not think their child was a high achiever and therefore never accessed the screening process. We immediately improved the referral system, increased recommendations and required the addition of two gifted classes in the south end. This was only the beginning. We recognized there were additional steps to take to ensure additional access to gifted programs for all students, regardless of background or location.

One of our first steps was to review our testing process to increase sensitivity for identifying ethnically diverse students. For example, we adopted the NNAT2 test rather than the CogAT test. One criticism of the CogAT is that it focuses heavily on English language proficiency and vocabulary skills. We also deployed tests at the schools that students attended, during school hours. Additional measures were included in the assessment process, such as achievement scores, information from parents, teachers, and community members, and a portfolio review approach through our appeals process.

Another step was to provide additional training for teachers and administrators in the area of gifted education and referral. Our educators now receive professional development about highly capable student characteristics and needs, along with best practices for reaching and teaching all gifted students in any classroom.

Alternative service models are being established, with the goal of keeping kids in their home schools, rather than bussing them to alternative locations for service. This will enable more students to remain in their home communities and keep their cultural ties and traditions every day of the week while receiving support services from trained teachers in their home school classes. We are creating more GATE model classes in various schools, which are multi-age, blended classrooms with clusters of gifted students. At the same time, we are working with administrators and teachers in secondary schools to create classes for highly capable students that focus on different domains, such as leadership, civics and study skills. Additional efforts at the secondary level are leading to more course offerings which meet the organization skill-development needs of many gifted students of all kinds, such as the IB and AVID programs, and increased course offerings such as journalism, media, and technology that focus on social and emotional skill-building as well as academic content.

District wide we are focusing on differentiating curriculum for all students, including highly capable students, and our new school district acceleration policy is
creating more opportunity for all. One outcome has been removing the label of “highly capable course” from math and language arts classes so all students can access high level academics and reduce the misconception that highly capable always equals high achievement.

Partnerships with nearby community groups have also increased in order to facilitate referrals of students to the program and to support gifted education beyond the classroom. We are reaching out to nearby universities involved in teacher preparation to train new educators working in gifted education, along with increasing access to organizations such as WAETAG, SENG, and NAGC.

Excellent progress has been made. The evidence for this is the two-fold increase in referrals for diverse students to receive gifted education services, which are now proportional to our district demographics. In addition, approximately half of all referrals are from the south half of the city which includes historically lower income areas.

The increase in referrals has led to productive discussions in schools going on between administrators, teachers, and parents about the characteristics and needs of gifted learners. Instructional coaches are also providing significant contributions to these discussions, as well as assisting with raising awareness about supporting gifted education. For example, many administrators and teachers are part of steering committees, where the district’s policies are reviewed and improved. In addition, momentum generated by these discussions has prompted many elementary principles to express interest in hosting GATE classes at their schools next year rather than waiting for the district’s goal of the GATE classrooms expanding in the 2015-2016 school year.

There is still a lot of work to be done. After our testing period this winter we will use a multi-disciplinary team to create placement lists for our current JAWS, SAIL, and GATE classes as well as for our new middle and high school classes. We will add more GATE classes so that after next school year we serve all elementary students five days a week in their home schools instead of serving many students just one day a week through pull-out programs. We will have also increased our formal identification process to include screening for K-2 and high school students who are new to the Tacoma School district.

It is a very exciting time for highly capable education in Washington State and specifically in the Tacoma Public Schools. By focusing on identifying students who are both performing at the top as well as those who are capable of performing at the top (but underperforming) we will continue to be more equitable and accurate in our identification and services and therefore change the entire face of highly capable programming in our state to keep more highly capable students from falling through the cracks.

References

Kathleen Casper, JD, is the K-12 Highly Capable Program Facilitator for Tacoma Public Schools and a part time education and family law attorney. She has taught at all levels K-12 as well as worked in several gifted education programs in WA and FL. She is a Golden Apple Award winner as well as the national board secretary of SENG (www.SENGifted.org) and the new vice president of WAETAG and parent of four gifted children. She speaks and writes internationally, advocates for children, and advises state and national policy bodies on gifted education issues.
Asynchronous development, accelerated information processing, unusual depth of understanding, and the capacity to handle increasing levels of complexity are just some of the distinctive characteristics of the highly capable learner which led to the revision of Chapter 28A.185 of the Revised Code of Washington (2009):

The legislature finds that, for highly capable students, access to accelerated learning and enhanced instruction is access to a basic education. There are multiple definitions of highly capable, from intellectual to academic to artistic. The research literature strongly supports using multiple criteria to identify highly capable students, and therefore, the legislature does not intend to prescribe a single method (p.1).

The Statute, and accompanying Washington Administrative Code (WAC) revisions, challenge districts to do more than identify their most highly capable students based on the district’s established definition, and more than create a singular program at a given time to serve those students. Instead, the law encourages schools to ensure that an evolving continuum of services is in place to serve their highly capable students through access to accelerated and enhanced instruction, K-12. This legislation recognizes that highly capable students are so every day of the week, during regular school hours, throughout their lives, and not just at a distinct point in time in their educational experience. In sum, this legislation represents a shift in thinking from a program-centered approach to education to a student-centered one. How do schools meet this challenge? By adapting systems currently in place, adding evidence-based best practices and services for meeting the needs of exceptional learners, and providing systematic professional development opportunities for working with this unique population. This article addresses what accelerated learning and enhanced instruction are, as well as the essential elements for developing a continuum of services in a district.

### Differentiation for Highly Capable Students

Quality curriculum and instruction for the highly capable learner include increased depth, complexity, novelty and acceleration. According to the National Association for Gifted Children (2010) and research conducted in the field (Rogers, 2007), this includes differentiating the pace and rate of learning, providing time for students to explore areas of interest in-depth, and assigning work involving more complex problems and resources to provide daily challenge. Additionally, it is important that highly capable students spend time with their intellectual peers on a regular basis for social interaction and the chance to work with students who can challenge their way of thinking.

Accelerated learning and enhanced instruction are two main categories of differentiation for highly capable students that help define the possibilities of what a teacher and district can do to ensure learning needs are met. Students may need enhanced and accelerated experiences in all content areas or just one; it depends on the individual learner. Therefore, a range of services is required for achieving differentiated instruction in the classroom and across the district.

### Accelerated Learning

Acceleration is an educational practice that has been around for centuries. It can be described as students progressing through their education at a faster rate or younger than the conventional age (Pressey, 1949). The 2004 publication *A Nation at Risk* exposed how our schools are holding back its brightest learners, and authors Colangelo, Assouline and Gross (2004) identified 18 different types of acceleration that can be implemented into the school system.
to appropriately challenge highly capable learners. Some of these options include early entrance, grade skipping, subject-based acceleration, and advanced experiences.

**Early entrance.** Early entrance refers to the early admission of a student to any grade level of the school system based on demonstrated need. Examples include early entrance to Kindergarten, first grade, or middle school, as well as early graduation enabling a student to move on to college earlier than most.

**Grade skipping.** Grade skipping may be appropriate when a student demonstrates overall high achievement and needs to be advanced at least one grade level in the majority of content areas.

**Subject-based acceleration.** Partial acceleration can be provided to students in a variety of ways. For example, a student may demonstrate mastery of a concept or skill through a pre-assessment. The teacher can then replace the mastered curriculum with appropriately challenging material that is more complex. This practice is called “compacting” the curriculum. The replaced academic work can be accelerated through practices such as self-paced instruction guided by the teacher, dual enrollment in a higher grade level, advanced placement and honors courses, or even online courses. Some students may be ready to “telescope” the curriculum and learn two or more years of curriculum in a content area in one school year.

**Advanced experiences.** Advanced experiences come in a variety of forms, the most common of which are internships, mentorships, and extracurricular programs. Students demonstrating advanced skill in a domain may be connected to an internship or mentorship, and extracurricular programs. These can be designed specifically for highly capable students, such as the William and Mary units in language arts, math, social studies, and science developed at the Center for Gifted Education at the College of William and Mary. Finally, enhanced instruction can be integrated into acceleration options to provide rigorous and advanced learning experiences.

**Enhanced Instruction**
Enhanced instruction means tailoring pedagogy for highly capable students, often characterized by adjusting curricula for additional depth, complexity, or novelty. Instructional approaches that foster these skills include service-learning, place-based learning, and problem-based learning. Compacting the curriculum may also be used to provide opportunities for students to comprehend subject matter at deeper levels. For instance, independent projects focused on student interests can be designed by the student and teacher to further extend the curriculum. There are also curricula designed specifically for highly capable students, such as the William and Mary units in language arts, math, social studies, and science developed at the Center for Gifted Education at the College of William and Mary. Finally, enhanced instruction can be integrated into acceleration options to provide rigorous and advanced learning experiences.

**Developing a Continuum of Services**
The National Association for Gifted Children developed K-12 program standards as a guide for districts when creating a comprehensive highly capable program (NAGC, 2010). The standards are divided into six categories that educators may use for designing effective programs for highly capable students. Categories include 1) addressing unique cognitive and affective needs, 2) assessment methods for identification and program evaluation, 3) curriculum planning and instruction, 4) effective learning environments, 5) programming options to create a continuum of services, and 6) professional development needs for school personnel. The standards state that in the context of program development programming refers to a continuum of services that address the academic and social needs of students with gifts and talents in all settings (NAGC, 2010). The newly revised WAC on gifted and talented includes this distinction and promotes application of a range of services for meeting the needs of highly capable students. The goal is to provide students with appropriate services throughout their educational experience.

When determining what an effective, appropriate K-12 continuum of services will look like, a number of factors must be considered. A viable, quality continuum will be built on the foundation of a district philosophy committed to serving the needs of highly capable students, including a definition of who those students are and clearly defined objectives associated with the types of services to be provided. Additionally, a district will need to consider their student demographics, community values, funding realities, and school cultures (Brighton, 2010). Once these foundational pieces are in place, the district team can build a continuum of services designed to match their particular student population academic and social needs.

There are five main service delivery models to consider when building a continuum of services. These models include integrated classroom support, cluster grouping, pull-out programs, special classes, and special schools (Schroth, 2013).

**Integrated classroom support.** This model refers to differentiated instruction and services for highly capable students within the regular classroom.

**Cluster grouping.** Cluster grouping is a way to systematically group high achieving students together in classrooms for the school year. Teachers working in cluster classrooms have a range of students, like usual, but the number of high achieving students is condensed by clustering these students in a classroom with a teacher trained to adapt curriculum to meet their academic needs. Research has shown that all students make achievement gains in this type of arrangement (Gentry & Mann, 2008).

**Pull-out programs.** Pull-out programs provide part-time accelerated or enhanced instruction outside the regular classroom by a trained teacher.

**Special classes.** Special classes also offer accelerated and enhanced instruction. However, they suggest more pedagogical or discipline specific options at the secondary level, such as honors or Advanced Placement. At the elementary level, a special class may be a full-time self-contained classroom for highly capable students in a school-within-a-school model.

**Special schools.** Special schools are full-time, discipline specific or comprehensive academic programs designed for highly capable students.

A district may consider the five models and select one or more as an appropriate framework for developing its plan. The type of service model selected often depends on the size of the district. For example,
while all districts may choose to include integrated classroom support to differentiate curriculum and instruction, not all will have the number of students required to run a special school.

Once the model of service is determined, the actual activities within each model are selected. Figure 1 is a graphic representing a number of activities that reflect both accelerated and enhanced learning options for highly capable students.

Ideally, a district will have services that represent all levels of the pyramid. Those at the base are appropriate for more students and include enrichment, regular classroom instructional modifications, and extracurricular activities to develop talent. Closer to the top of the pyramid, the options become more focused on acceleration and serve a fewer number of students who require these types of services. Additionally, they require more organization and facilitation from an administrator. For example, cluster grouping is intentionally designed when assigning students to classrooms for the year. It should be noted that differentiation and flexible grouping strategies still take place within the different class configurations and options.

Figure 2 shows the components of a comprehensive continuum of service designed to provide consistent and appropriately challenging learning experiences for highly capable students. These components are consistent with what small districts can reasonably provide under current financial limitations. Larger districts, presumably with more resources, may consider cluster grouping, self-contained classrooms, and magnet schools to better serve students with exceptionalities.

Overall, there are a number of ways in which a district can create a comprehensive plan of services for highly capable students. A thoughtfully and intentionally designed portfolio of services will lead to opportunities for accelerated and enhanced learning opportunities for students throughout their education.

Starting from What You Are Currently Doing

Districts should start designing their highly capable program by examining what they are currently doing and then adding or modifying services. This approach will ensure change is sustainable according to currently accepted practices within the district. For example, a rural district that currently has multiage classrooms in the elementary grades with teachers working collaboratively to flexibly group students in math and language arts based on student readiness level may want to extend this model to additional content areas. Students may be allowed to dually enroll in the middle or high school for acceleration. A large district that currently serves highly capable students through pull-out or magnet programs may consider expanding services to all schools through cluster grouping and differentiated instructional practices.

Examples can be found throughout the state of Washington of districts working together to build effective programs. The Rural Alliance for College and Career Success is exploring options to expand accelerated course opportunities by sharing instructors across districts using an online platform. It has also received a grant to develop a blended learning environment for math curriculum and instruction in grades K-8 to support struggling learners and challenge high achieving students. Some Educational Service Districts are also examining ways to provide training, resources, and networking opportunities to aid districts in complying with increased service requirements.

Professional Development

One requirement for successful implementation of a continuum of services for highly capable learners is professional development for all school personnel involved with highly capable education. This includes administrators, principals, counselors, and of course teachers. Indeed, WAC 392-170-030 requires that all educators receive ongoing professional development related to serving the needs of gifted learners. Specific areas for training include “identification procedures, academic, social and emotional characteristics, program design and delivery, instructional practices, student assessment, and program evaluation” (WAC 392-170-
038, 2013, p.1). Moreover, the Highly Capable Technical Working Group also recommends professional development in the areas of cultural competency, special populations, collaboration and communication skills (Pauley & Hess, 2010). Finally, new teacher and principal evaluation criteria assess educators on their facility with recognizing individual student learning needs and developing strategies to address those needs (Washington State TPEP, 2013).

There are a number of different models and strategies for professional development. A combination of strategies that includes individual, small group, and district training opportunities across settings on an ongoing basis are especially effective. Formats to consider include professional learning community book studies, lesson study, peer coaching, and formal coursework. Regardless of the approach, elements of effective professional development includes theory, implementation, feedback, and continuing support (Cooper, 2004)

Conclusion

There are many options for creating a successful continuum of services to meet the needs of highly capable students. Nevertheless, it is necessary to create programs that align with individual student needs, district demographics, community values, and resources. Sustainable models involve parents, teachers, and administrators, with equal input in the formation of an effective portfolio of services to ensure viability and achievement of goals, not the least of which is enabling all students to reach their full potential.

References


Kathryn Picanço, Ed.D. is an Associate Professor of Education and the Director of the Center for Gifted Education at Whitworth University in Spokane. Kathryn teaches courses in the Gifted and Talented Education and teacher preparation programs at Whitworth.
Reflecting on the years I’ve been teaching, I ask myself what is it “I do” to get my students to learn and thrive in my classroom, especially in American History. As I reflect, I know this is something I did not accomplish alone. I realize it is the combination of so many things I have learned over the years and the efforts of so many people. The opportunities learned over the span of my career and the incredible students I have had along the way have molded me into who I am as a teacher today. Here are a few opportunities and experiences that define my work best.

Always a Learner

My journey as a teacher began over 27 years ago, as a new graduate from Washington State University. I find that I was as passionate then, as I am today. It has always been my goal to make a difference in each of my student’s lives, to create the conditions for all students to succeed and to instill a deep understanding of American History. Over the years, I have done this by creating a “projects” based classroom using American History as my guide. But, my desire to create highly engaging integrated units truly started, six years ago, when I became a learner myself as a participant in Causes of Conflict, Teaching American History grants. These grants taught me how to develop and teach engaging history lessons using primary sources. I learned how to implement learning strategies to reach each student. These grants allowed me to live moments in history and bring back what I learned to my students. This learning experience was life changing for me as an educator.

Recognizing the Learner

Knowing how students learn best when they enter my classroom is a priority. Each student enters unique, with different life experiences. Some are academically gifted, many are average, some have language barriers, some are behaviorally challenged and others struggle with disabilities. So how do I get all of them engaged and excited to learn? It begins first with each student understanding and recognizing how they learn best. Students learn to evaluate themselves. I teach them to understand “the ways they are smart” using Multiple Intelligence inventories and we study learning styles. My students are able to recognize their own personal strengths and weaknesses as learners. Students sit in collaborative teams of six or seven. Their teams remain the same all year to build trust and relationships. These “learning families” allow each teammate an opportunity to shine in the ways they are smart and to be a mentor to another. This climate creates a safe place to learn where they are encouraged to do their best work each day.

A Teacher of Inquiry

I love developing integrated lessons with guiding questions designed to create opportunities for students to show historical thinking skills and English Language Arts common core literacy skills. I do this by using primary sources and technology in the classroom to allow students to “find” their own answers and develop a thesis based on the evidence. In other words, my students become detectives digging deep into academic content at their own personal levels.

Innovative Teaching Strategies

Scottish Storyline…an approach I use to integrate American History, science, primary sources, ELA common core literacy and art into projects by creating historically accurate settings. They become characters living through a “time and place” historical event. This approach to teaching also creates curriculum based assessment opportunities with a deeper and more meaningful understanding of the content. My students travel back in time and live moments in American History, while trying to answer
guiding project based questions everyday of the school the year!

Facilitator of Student Leadership and Classroom Democracy

Our classroom is a thriving democracy run by the students themselves. We hold class elections at the beginning of the year and these officers become our guides in the democratic process. As a class we focus on the traits of leadership and study closely the traits of American leaders, such as George Washington’s showing “perseverance” or Abraham Lincoln’s “standing up for what you believe in.” In fact, students in my classroom, strive to be “Lincoln-ess” each day. This attitude sets the stage for my students to make a difference in our class community, school community, and neighborhood community by becoming responsible, contributing people beyond the classroom.

A Collaborative Coach

I am actively demonstrating lessons in front of fellow teachers and administrators, demonstrating firsthand what students are capable of doing with high academic rigor while they are completely engaged in their own learning. My passion to share what students can do when challenged is infectious. I have written and received two Library of Congress - Teaching with Primary Sources grants and I have had the privilege of presenting at the Western Region Social Studies Conference in Denver and Tucson the past two years. My goal was and still is simple… to share the teaching of American History using primary sources with fellow teachers and to spread the news about creating engaging lessons so all kids can learn.

In closing, because I share my teaching journey with my students, I asked them how I inspire them to learn. It’s a statement made by one of them that truly sums it up best, “Mrs. J., you take us back in time and make the past come back to life again!” It’s true and this is what I love to do for every one of my students.

Amy Johnson has been a classroom teacher for the past 29 years. She currently teaches 8th grade Social Studies at Cascade Middle School in the Longview School District.
A message from
the executive director

Executive Directions

This June will mark the end of my 8th year as the Executive Director of Washington State ASCD. What a journey it has been! This Association has gone through many changes over the years, but the fundamental mission has remained the same – to promote promising practices to ensure ALL students are safe, healthy, engaged, supported and challenged. Every change has been embraced by Association members and has made us stronger, better. For me, every challenge has been an opportunity to grow personally and professionally. It has been an absolute pleasure working with so many caring, committed educators who see change as a catalyst for reaching new levels of effectiveness. Washington State ASCD is on solid ground, largely due to the efforts of several boards of directors which have adapted to our changing educational landscape. This year has been no exception, with the leadership of President, Dr. Ismael Vivanco. We’ve met the challenges of budget cuts in school districts across our state, which directly affected our association’s financial health, through our board’s efforts and with the counsel of our past presidents. I would like to personally thank Past Presidents Dr. Becky Berg, Ms. Helene Paroff, Ms. Janel Keating, Dr. Mike Dunn, Dr. Josh Garcia, and Mr. Tim Nootenboom for their guidance through the years. As I leave the position of executive director, I look forward to continuing my work as the webmaster for Washington State ASCD, and will remain a strong advocate for the work of this association.

Thank You
Departing Board Members

Board members contribute countless hours of conference calls and meetings, providing a critical level of insight into issues that guide our Association forward. Leaving the board in June is Mr. Tim Nootenboom, Director Teaching and Learning in Central Valley School District, who has served on the Board for the past six years. Having served as the ASCD Representative, President-elect, President and Past President, Tim’s commitment to our Association has been unwavering. During his tenure, Mr. Nootenboom moved us forward with inspiration by setting direction and guiding the Board through direct, collaborative conversations. Other members who will be completing their terms of service include Mr. Brent Howard, Technology Specialist in Central Valley School District and Ms. Janet Regge, Instructional Facilitator at Honey Dew Elementary in Renton School District. The perseverance and contributions of Tim, Brent, and Janet, as well as our entire Board of Directors, have been greatly appreciated as we moved forward with so many critical decisions.

Welcome
Dr. Art Jarvis
New Executive Director

The Board of Directors for Washington State ASCD is pleased to announce that beginning July 1, Dr. Art Jarvis will succeed Mrs. Clayton as the executive director of WSASC. Dr. Jarvis has served students in our state for over 47 years. Starting his teaching career in the rural town of Waitsburg and retiring as Superintendent of Tacoma Public Schools in 2012, he has demonstrated passion, innovation and advocacy for thousands of students in the various roles he has filled. He was awarded Superintendent of the Year twice during his career in our state. Currently, Dr. Jarvis continues his contributions to education by serving as an Executive Coach and Instructor in the Administrative Program at Seattle University. Dr. Jarvis has been a friend of Washington State ASCD for many years, having served as a board member and also president in 1998, as well as being involved with ASCD International. We are pleased to have Dr. Jarvis join and lead the Association once again as the new Executive Director.

Moving Forward

As you know, the work of Washington State ASCD has been centered on supporting you, as educators, so you can best serve the children of our state. In these changing times, remember that you count! As you go about your daily life as an educator, remember that the work you do with children and your community does make a difference. On behalf of Washington State ASCD, thank you for your caring, your strength and your belief in children.

Respectfully,
Kathy Clayton

by Kathy Clayton
Transcending Boundaries with Technology

In 1994, most schools were disconnected from the digital information highway. After 20 years, the reverse is true. Nearly all schools provide access to the Internet. Connectivity has improved dramatically, and so have digital tools and models educators are using to transcend traditional boundaries of teaching and learning. Online gradebooks, electronic plan books, computer-adaptive testing, learning management systems, electronic portfolios, and question-answer databases are just a few of the tools educators may use. New teaching models are evolving around emerging technologies, such as bring-your-own-device, flipped classroom, and anywhere-anytime learning.

The next theme of *Curriculum in Context* is Transcending Boundaries with Technology. How do you use digital tools or related pedagogy to improve outcomes? What model has your school embraced for enhancing access to content? What strategies has your district employed for improving collection and use of electronic data? These are some of the questions under consideration in the next issue of *Curriculum in Context*.

The editorial staff invites you to submit a manuscript on this topic by September 12th to David Denton (dentod@spu.edu). Final manuscripts are typically 850-2500 words and citations are written in APA format.

**SUBMISSION DEADLINE**
September 12, 2014