Teaching Gifted Students and Curriculum Compacting

After reviewing the case studies and other assigned readings on giftedness it is clear that gifted students often go unrecognized and/or do not receive the level of challenge that they need and deserve. I’ve learned that gifted students have very individual needs and that teachers, as with many other exceptionalities, seem to lack the training required to offer gifted students program modifications which allow gifted students to work ahead at a more advanced level or to simply take the time to explore an area of interest. I have also found that there are some common misconceptions about gifted students. Gifted students may not stand out as top performers. In my experience, as a general rule the top academic achievers are usually the most well behaved and most helpful students. It was interesting to learn that giftedness may only present itself in specific areas of learning and that while gifted students may be at the top of their class in one or more curriculum subjects, they may struggle with behavioural and social issues. This contrasts the typical high academic achiever who tends to be an all around model student. The government of British Columbia, based on its research on giftedness, suggests that, “gifted students need a learning environment that provides opportunities for challenge, opportunities to work with intellectual peers, encouragement to become independent learners, and curriculum enrichment” (Ministry of Education, 2013). These guidelines are consistent with my findings.

Unfortunately, many teachers seem to be failing to meet the needs of their students, particularly those who are gifted, apparently because they appear as though they do not require support with their learning. This may be true, but they are not being provided with the right opportunities to broaden their understandings and expand on their knowledge. Teachers are not implementing the kind of differentiated instruction that provides gifted students with added depth in their learning to ensure an appropriate level of challenge and growth. Instead, gifted students often end up sitting through boring lessons that cover information or concepts that they already know, which is unfair as it does not benefit the student (Manning, Reeves, and Stanford. 146). Research suggests that, “typically, advanced learners demonstrate a strong, interest-based intrinsic motivation; a capacity for understanding abstract concepts; and an ability to transfer knowledge from one learning situation to another” (Manning et al. 145). Therefore, in order to support these complex characteristics, gifted students require differentiated instruction, “that integrates substantive information across the curriculum in advanced content, process, and product, as well as a democratic learning environment” (Manning et al. 146).
Curriculum compacting is one strategy that has proven to help meet the learning needs of gifted students. Ultimately, this strategy allows for students to work through curriculum material more quickly and then focus on extending their understanding. Through a variety of observations and assessments, a teacher can determine what gifted students already know and then allow them to compact the curriculum and, “do assignment in [the] areas where work is needed, and then be freed to work on other curricular areas” (Ministry of Education). Pre-assessment does not need to be particularly formal. Teachers may use observations or a short discussion before using their professional judgment to decide if the student has mastered a certain topic (Coil, 2008). With curriculum compacting, the gifted student can, as Renzulli and Reis have put it, reduce repetition and buy time to work on individual projects of their choice, or as provided by the teacher (Ministry of Education). Clearly, this opportunity helps promote a positive attitude in students about school. While there are often extension activities provided in teacher guides, gifted students do not necessarily need to continue working in the same subject area as their peers. The key is to provide some flexibility or extensions that allow students to expand their already extensive knowledge of an area of interest. In some cases, gifted students may also be provided the opportunity to work with students in grades above them in order to extend their learning. Regardless of the teacher’s approach, compacting activities should never include drills or practice sheets that focus on skills the student already knows (Coil, 2008).

While the impacts of moving students ahead of their peers are not fully agreed upon, I agree with the research that supports the overall outcome of compacting or accelerating student learning. When the right opportunities are provided for gifted students, research suggests that students feel more positively about themselves than those who are not provided with differentiated instruction (Kanevsky, 158). The research of Kanevsky also suggests that gifted students not provided with accelerated learning opportunities were less likely to enroll in academically rigorous programs and were more likely to experiences lower life satisfaction and higher rates of socialization struggles (Kanevsky, 157). This finding suggests that when gifted students are able to explore their interests and connect with others who share those interests, they are more likely to experience a sense of belonging and to appreciate learning at school. Otherwise, gifted students are left feeling bored and disconnected from their peers, which has been linked to higher high stress levels and negative attitude towards school (Kanevsky, 157).

Teaching gifted students is not all that different than teaching students with other exceptionalities. It seems clear that regardless of the type of need, a teacher’s knowledge of his or her student must go beyond awareness of the student’s exceptionality if the teacher is going to effectively differentiate instruction. Indeed, teachers can use interest and learning style inventories, checklists and assessments to purposefully get to know their student(s) in greater depth (Manning, Reeves, and Stanford, 147). In order to meet the needs
of gifted students, comprehensive assessment, thoughtful decision making, flexible implementation and careful monitoring are needed (Kanevsky, 157). When the right opportunities are provided, gifted students may fully realize their academic potential and enjoy the social and educational success that they are capable of.

Works Cited


