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Teachers Identify and Support At-Risk Gifted Students in the Regular Classroom

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Abstract

The purpose of this article is to use a research-based and teaching experience approach to demonstrate how regular classroom teachers identify and support at-risk students with academic and social issues impacting their lives. It also gives insight about challenges facing these students from the teachers' perspectives. Six different case-studies briefly describe a gifted at-risk student that each teacher recognized as needing help and found ways to provide support. Each case study reflects the teacher's way of identifying and resolving a student concern. They cite current research to support their analysis. It is their hope that the research documented approach will catch the eye of the reader. Teachers came up with solutions that will help other teachers identify and support at-risk gifted students in their classroom. Each teacher's professional experiences complemented each report as presented.

Introduction

Six experienced teachers in the regular classroom, who happen to have one, or more students identified by the school as having gifted characteristics or students that teachers felt should have been identified as a gifted student, developed their way of helping students overcome personal challenges. It is our hope that a research documented approach will catch the eye of other teachers and motivate them to do the same. Each teacher documented research as it relates to his/her student(s). In the absence of a school identification process, other researched identification processes served as benchmark for teacher support. Following are case study reports as developed by each teacher.

Teacher One

After the devastating hurricane Katrina hit Louisiana, our school district received an influx of students from the neighboring state. Our school alone accepted 10-12 families, each with 2-4 students. One family in particular was a single mother with four sons, four school-aged students and one on the way. The mother enrolled all four of her sons at our school. With very little grade level documentation that was destroyed in the storms I was fortunate to have worked with all four children for almost two years. During this time, I was able to observe the difficult life/school adjustments evacuees had to make from a shelter, a new community, a new school, new teachers, and new friends.

Each of her children found his place within his class relatively quickly, except for Delvin. Delvin was a fourth grader last year. He had two older step-brothers in the fifth grade; one had repeated a grade previously. The two older brothers were extreme opposites in interest, ability and personality. One was a huge basketball fan, preoccupied with playing the game, talking about the game, and eating/sleeping basketball if possible. The other was a reserved, high achiever, and a perfectionist.

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Delvin looked up to his two older brothers, but of the four, he seemed to be most “distracted” and suffered academically. He was extremely creative in art class and enjoyed math, but refused to conform to new rules and the new system. Delvin often was sent to me with discipline referrals because he was “disruptive.” He seemed angry most of the time. I made an effort to establish an open-line of communication with his mother early in the year. I soon came to find out that Delvin’s father had left the family, Mom had no job and she could not afford rent. She was worried about her sons’ futures as well as her own. The picture was grim, but our leadership team and support staff were willing to take action to help make Delvin’s academic life successful.

In his article, Ken Seeley (2004) described the meaning of the “learning disabled gifted.” I characterized Delvin in such a category largely because of his under-achievement due to his ‘economically deprived home situation.’ If Delvin was not in art class, or in math, he seemed unmotivated, lazy and as a result developed behavior problems. Delvin also experienced the all-too familiar “reciprocal relationship between behavior and grades” in his least favorite content areas (Whitmore, 1989). Delvin disliked social studies, and his grades reflected this. “Why answer 25 questions at the end of the chapter, if I already know what the teacher is talking about?” is an example of what he often said. As a result, Delvin got himself into trouble and managed to get kicked out of class quite often on a regular basis, and was suspended for more serious and continuous infractions.

Delvin was referred for individual counseling sessions with our school counselor, who also established communication with the student’s mother. The counselor was an excellent resource for Delvin. It was his time to share his feelings about family poverty, his fears, ambitions, and begin to think about a roadmap to his own academic success.

The counselor talked to his mother about parental expectations for Delvin and the other children. With her own lack of education, “mom” felt out of the loop about the educational system in Texas. She was receptive about ways to assist her children in school and after school activities. Fourth and fifth grade teachers worked with the administrative team closely. They identified Delvin’s needs (as well as his siblings’ needs) in his academic life, such as: hands-on/minds-on lessons (cognitively challenging), celebrating cultural diversity (Seely, 2004) through content lessons, working with a mentor, and making learning relevant to the student (McNulty, 1999).

Delvin is now a fifth grader. His brothers are now in middle school, and he has since become the role model for his two younger brothers. (Yes, the baby was a boy!) Delvin continues to be interested in art and math. He hopes to be an architect someday, and he has taken on a new leadership role. He leads the “reading buddy” club at school, and helps match other 5th grade students with Kindergarten students to read books together. This has been one success story we are most proud of at our school. With two older brothers well on their way, and a mom who has struggled and overcome barriers, Delvin will be successful in life, I am sure of it.

Analysis of Teacher One

Delvin is not part of the typical nuclear family. He has two step brothers and a missing father figure. School personnel are the main source of support. However, continued counseling and parental support should be available as part of his continued development. This will help him to adjust to and become part of a new school and family environment after a life altering natural disaster.

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Teacher Two

The one student I worked with to affect positive change this semester is a young man named Aaron. He is a 12th grader, who continued to fail his Science Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills (TAKS) and therefore would not be able to graduate this May. The primary reason Aaron continues to fail his TAKS assessment is because he refuses to work through his English language acquisition issues which affects his ability to read and understand the test items (Freeman & Freeman, 2001; Cary, 2000; Hill, & Flynn, 2006). None-the-less, I believe he exhibits qualities of a gifted young man. He knows the correct answer in class and earned excellent grades on his report card but because of his lack of English usage, he has never been nominated to be tested to determine if he qualified for the gifted program in our school (Bernal, 2000; Castellan & Diaz, 2002; Slocumb & Payne, 2000).

Aaron demonstrates other charismatic characteristics supported by research that continue to encourage me to believe that he is gifted. One characteristic that impressed me the most is that he is a natural leader. His fellow students follow his example on a daily basis. He stands up for what he believes in even if I indicate he is wrong (Bernal, 2000; Castellano & Diaz, 2002). Regarding his English, he looks right at me, and shrugs his shoulders and scorns me. "Ya, no necesito English. Ya, no es importante." He believes in who he is.

Additionally, he relies on his excellent memory skills. Learning comes easily for Aaron. His memory absorbs information readily. However, whenever I teach the class test taking skill so he can be better prepared to tackle the TAKS assessment, Aaron claims "I am not teaching him the test" (Erickson, 2001; Hill & Flynn, 2006). I have called home to speak to his parents twice now for a family decision (Hine, 1992). I will advise the parents that if the family supports Aaron's timely graduation, we are on the same team. If not then, graduation later is the consequence. My next step is to have a face-to-face meeting with him and both his parents. I will be conducting this meeting this week (Hine, 1992). Sadly, if Aaron does not pass his exam this time around he will not be able to walk the graduation stage with his fellow classmates. The next time he and others will be able to test for the Science TAKS will be the 1st of May. However, if this happens, the assessment results will be reported after graduation. I trust we will have a happy ending; at least, we will have a family decision.

Analysis of Teacher Two

Teacher Two discussed a bi-lingual at-risk student who has a personal test-taking/attitude challenge that impacts his graduation and called for a family decision. It would have been better for Aaron to have been placed in a program that allowed his English language skills to grow with his other academic skills. Test-taking and language skills are his issue. The student might not be able to graduate with his classmates who may or may not be an issue for Aaron and/or his family. It really shows that there has been a lack of school placement, and identification of his needs was not addressed in his early academic learning leading to the current support need.

Teacher Three

I was able to assist a third grade boy, who is identified as gifted (GT) and Attention Deficit Hyper Disorder (ADHD) by the school. The research pointed out that there are students who can be twice-exceptional students. A student may be gifted and learning disabled or emotionally disturbed at the same time. After researching different ways to help him, I thought the use of bibliotherapy would help him. By reading about how other students, having the same problem that he has/had, he learns how the fictional character handled the problem. In order to fully benefit from bibliotherapy, there are three to four stages that a student will need to go through. The first is "identification," where the boy will identify with a character, characters, or events in

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the story. The second is "catharsis," when the student can release emotions after becoming involved with the story. This could be through art, writing, or discussion. The third stage is "insight," when, with the teacher's help, the boy can see how his own problem might be resolved through the identification of the resolution of a character's issues (McIntyre, 2004). A fourth stage is also suggested, "application," where the student can use problem solving techniques, such as Creative Problem Solving or Future Problem Solving, to examine real solutions.

Students often have trouble putting their own feelings into words and may be able to solve some of their own problems by examining them from a third-person perspective (Hebert, 1991). By reading literature on the particular topic important to an individual, a boy can relate the story to his own situation and use it as a starting point for discussion about his own issues. The teacher, counselor, or other adult provides guidance through the directed reading and activities (McIntyre, 2004). The hope is that the student will be able to articulate his feelings, develop positive feelings about his abilities, and find resolution to a particular problem (Schlichter & Burke, 1994; Hebert, 1991). This technique is particularly advantageous for gifted children, as it appeals to their abilities to conceptualize, generalize, and abstract (Clark, 2002). It is important to select a story-theme that is of high quality (powerful themes, clear language, and complex imagery) and can be a good vehicle for discussion (relevant topic, characters of appropriate age) (Schleicher & Burke, 1994).

The student that I worked with, "Bill," had some trouble with his second-grade teacher, perhaps because of the ADHD, but he seemed to be thriving in third grade. His mother, a teacher, joined us in discussion about what he would like to talk about, suggesting perhaps why he takes medicine in the morning or "school stuff." Bill decided that he wanted to talk about why his teacher calls him the "Math Whiz."

I chose two books for Bill to read – *Be Good to Eddie Lee*, by Virginia Fleming and *Albert Einstein*, a biography by Sheila Wyborny. I prepared activity plans for each book, discussed them at separate sessions. These plans included warm-up discussion, reviewing the stories, and then questions and discussion related to the four stages. I was limited in time, but tried to accomplish as much as possible. Using the book *Be Good to Eddie Lee*, we discussed positive and negative things about being different. Bill did seem to relate to Eddie's characteristics, which was Down's syndrome. Bill related to Eddie because he had been called a "dummy" by someone at school. While we did not get the chance for Bill to have a direct application to his situation, we did discuss character relationships in the book and how they might understand each other better. With the book about Albert Einstein, we discussed several questions, including "What are three things that you are good at?" "What things do you think you can do better than anyone else your age?" "What do you dream about doing one day?" Bill described an idea that he had for placing a microchip in a pencil that would be connected to a microchip in a person's brain. We also talked about how Albert Einstein would do in Bill's classroom and whether Bill thought that teachers like to have creative thinkers in their classrooms. He said, "Yes, because it gets the other kids to think more." His mother had been told by another teacher that he could not be gifted if he had ADHD.

Analysis of Teacher Three

Bibliotherapy is an effective strategy to help students who are having home or school issues. The child will effectively understand and learn how to deal with a problem he/she is facing by reading about the way someone else handles the same concern. After all, we have to go a long way to find two people who are exactly alike. In Bill's case the twice-exceptional, gifted (GT) and Attention Deficit Hyper Disorder (ADHD) and being different were issues that he is learning to deal with on a daily basis. Progress is well on its way. With time and patience, Bill will achieve long term benefits. As he gains insight into his own talents and learns that it is OK to be

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different, he will become a happy person. A side benefit is the contribution this experience has made to his mother's personal and current research insights about being twice exceptional.

Teacher Four

A quarter of a century ago, I taught at New Caney High School. At the time, New Caney had no gifted program, but I taught Algebra and Geometry to college-bound freshmen and sophomores. I saw most of the really smart kids who came through the school. One of my boys, John, was obviously gifted. His Stanford-Binet IQ had been measured in the 140s, but he had few social skills and was the target for bullies in the school. He displayed many of the negative traits. Among other things, he was indifferent to conventions and courtesies, tactless, disorganized and absent minded (Colangelo & Davis, 2003). He was pretty much the average 'geek' in school.

One day, after some of my students delivered a relatively severe assault on John's self esteem, I sent him to the library on a task for me. I then had a heart- to- heart chat with my class. I talked about who John was as a person, how smart he was and how that made him different, and laid out some of the possible consequences of their bullying, including driving him to suicide. After that, the bullying stopped. In addition, one of my other boys, we'll call him Chris, from that class took him under his wing. Chris had great social skills, and helped John to navigate the dangerous shoals of high school. Just before Christmas, access to a magnet school for gifted students came about. I encouraged my students to apply if they were interested. Both John and Chris applied and were accepted. About six weeks later, Chris returned to New Caney. He told me that the kids at the new school were "too weird" for him (Chris) to be comfortable there, but that John fitted in as if the school were made for him. Giftedness does not immunize a student from social or emotional problems. I believe that John's story is a case in point to research findings that show when gifted students spend time with others who share their abilities, they are happier and enjoy academic and social adjustment.

Analysis of Teacher Four

The teacher steps in when she is seeing the negative effects of bullying. Student's self-esteem can be affected with negative consequences for the student and the entire class. With support from the school counselor, group therapy activities can be implemented in the classroom to help students deal with issues that lead to bullying. The teacher becomes a counselor/ mediator to resolve a classroom issue. She also models for the entire class how to resolve personal differences.

Teacher Five

I teach technology courses in a community college system. With increasing community college enrollment and a possible re-definition of "giftedness" to include creativity, a new crop of community college students may be better served by using elements of creativity in their instructional strategies. Community colleges have assumed an increasingly central role in the nation's education and training system (Kane & Rouse, 1999). This type of open door system usually requires that entrants only have a high school diploma or be 18 years of age (Dougherty, 1994). According to Bauman (2006), theory has held that this "open door" provided a second chance to correct previous educational deficiencies. Erroneous assumptions regarding these students seem to persist and with the newly revised definition of giftedness to include creativity, these students may need additional services to render their full potential.

According to Burke-Adams (2007), traditional assessment of giftedness included standardized tests, which test for analytical thinking. Due to the pressures of standards based state testing, the

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curriculum often focuses on a narrowed set of test items. Even though standards based education fulfills the need for the student to obtain basic knowledge and facts, students are more engaged and enlightened when performing creative tasks (Seeley, 2004). Two types of learners can emerge from school systems, linear thinkers who prefer structure and creative thinkers who have imaginative intelligence; when identifying students with gifted abilities, it is common for teachers to initially look at standards based assessments, while spatial strengths, a determinate of creative intelligence is rarely assessed (Burke-Adams, 2006).

I have identified a student in my class who may classify as a creative gifted student who needs mentoring support this student consistently engages in creative discourse on subject matter and has even designed a lower cost technical alternative to a gaming device that is very popular with teens. Renzulli's (1978) definition of gifted and talented includes above average ability, task commitment, and creative expression. When all three are applied it results in valuable human endeavor (Gibson & Efinger, 2001). When element of giftedness and elements of creativity are present one may witness in a student's creative design product. This bright, creative student is technically adept and enjoys being on the computer. With the upcoming end of semester, I feel the student may not have an outlet to discuss ideas and thoughts about technology. I am going to suggest the student use mentoring services such as those available via tele-mentoring.

According to Del Siegle (2003), the nature and diversity of gifted students' interests demand resources beyond the confines of the school and sometimes beyond the confines of the community. The general goal of most tele-mentoring programs is to provide individualized academic, motivational, and emotional support by using technology to bring adults into children's school experiences. Del Siegle states that through mentorships, young people can learn more at an accelerated pace with meaningful and personal feedback (Purcell, Renzulli, McCoach, & Spottiswoode, 2001).

I reviewed eight mentoring websites and decided that MadSci.org was the best fit for my student. It does not require a lengthy signup process, for student or expert, and each question is moderated. This website claims that it is a *free*, web-based Ask-A-Scientist service. Anyone may submit a question to be answered by people actively engaged in science and research. They maintain a searchable archive of all questions and answers as an ongoing resource for teachers, students and the World Wide Web, WWW, community at large.

Analysis of Teacher Five

Learning how to analyze selectively all human and material resources to expand one's knowledge is a learning skill in itself. There are websites that are meaningful and helpful and others that are misleading with inaccurate or dated information. Learning how to sort out credible sources will help the student. Often the pressure of time to complete a task will lead to the temptation to use the fastest and easiest way to get done. Learning, by doing research, using a variety of tools, teaches how to de-select and select forming good judgment and growing in knowledge, Resources abound, with the advent of technology. Critical use of the World Wide Web in conjunction with other sources of information will help achieve goals.

Teacher Six

In one of my Kindergarten classes, I came across an at-risk, African-American student named Mike who displayed a wide variety of gifted characteristics. Every week when I would present my lessons, Mike seemed mesmerized by the lesson and actively participated throughout. His teacher was always surprised when he would become so involved in my lesson. He did not do well academically, rarely participated in class, and was often sent to the office for disciplinary

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action. She was even more surprised when I spoke to her about his gifted characteristics; she saw these behaviors as problematic, not gifted traits.

I soon realized that his teacher had low expectations of him, which caused him to be low-performing and problematic in her classroom. Seeley (2004) stated "...by lowering students' grades...the schools inadvertently prompted the students to act out and become behavior problem. Students with behavior problems automatically got lower grades regardless of their ability. This vicious cycle works against high-risk gifted students." I certainly found this to be the case with Mike.

In addition, when I pulled him with a small group of gifted students and worked with him on an individual basis, I found that Mike was highly creative and very good at problem solving and logical deductions. He often led the group and assisted others when we solved mystery stories. A statement made by Renzulli (1994) confirmed my suspicions about Mike; he said "every child is special if we create conditions in which that child can be a specialist within a specialty group" (p.70). Shortly thereafter, Mike was referred for GT testing and qualified for services in our district. His teacher certainly has a different opinion of him now, and has mentioned that she will look at the behaviors and tendencies displayed by Mike differently for her future students.

Analysis of Teacher Six

An important contribution a teacher can make for his or her students is creating an environment where the student's potential is allowed to blossom. Prediction of academic success based on race is not supported by research. Teachers have to look beyond the surface to be able to help students. An analysis of gifted education research stresses the importance of accurate identification. Even when there is only one teacher who has the research and local school district policy down pat on identifying gifted students, this is a major asset for a school and for the students.

Conclusion

The above regular classroom teacher research based reports are examples of how teachers who are earning degrees in gifted education are helping their students achieve their full potential. Each teacher documented her approach to research as it relates to his or her students. Each teacher came up with workable solutions that will help other teachers identify and support at-risk gifted students in their classroom. Each report reflects each teacher's personal use of research and teaching experience at identifying gifted students in the regular classroom.

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