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INTRODUCTION

This book is designed to help primary school teachers learn how to (1) individualise instruction, and (2) provide instruction appropriate for meeting the needs of a cluster of gifted children (3-6) in a regular heterogeneous classroom. The system can be used at all year levels, one to six. It depends heavily on learning centres, on the development of self-direction and independence among the children, freedom to let children surge ahead in the basic skills areas, and formal planning of their learning activities by the children each day using a learning agreement.

I have been using and developing the system for twelve years. I regularly evaluate it, including my masters thesis research (Feldhusen, 1968). It works. Students love it. Parents love it. My principal accepts it. I'm convinced now that several key elements are indispensable, like the cluster seating approach, classroom discussions, many classroom resources, excursions, a range of writing projects and chances for children to communicate with other children about their interests, ideas and work.

Developing the system and monitoring it takes a bit of work but the outcomes to me, the teacher, are tremendous. When children are dynamic, interactive learners in a classroom, you see their growth in thinking skills, in knowledge, in enthusiasm and in motivation to learn.

It is essential to have a good system for monitoring their work and progress, for providing feedback so that they can correct their errors and improve skills, and for keeping records of their progress. Through all this is the ebb and flow from day to day, as the gifted children surge ahead in their skills learning, in their projects and products, and in developing communication and leadership skills.

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1.

SCENE 1, THE TEACHERS' ROOM

Pat: I really like the system you use in your classroom, but it looks pretty complicated to me. Tell me about it. What does it involve? What are the parts I have to work on if I want to do it in my classroom?

Hazel: Well, step one begins with the identification process. I use IQs, test scores and rating scales to identify the children who need different learning experiences. It's not really a matter of saying who is or isn't gifted. It's a matter of identifying who needs supplementary or alternative activities.

Pat: Okay, that I like. We can go into detail later. What's next?

Hazel: I want the children to become self-directing, independent learners so I have a system where they create their own timetable each day. They fill out a learning agreement each morning and then go to work either at their seat or in the centres.

Pat: I like that. I've tried it. It's an idea I wanted to use more. Next.

Hazel: You have to get over row seating. Cluster seating, three or four children in a group, works very well. They learn to help one another, and it's great for small group work.

Pat: I worry about behaviour problems when you only have cluster seating. Don't the students talk too much? Isn't there too much movement around the room?

Hazel: Well, you have to get used to a bit more noise and activity, but with good guidance from you they learn to be on task better than when they sit in rows.

2.

IDENTIFICATION OF GIFTED CHILDREN

The identification of gifted children can be carried out as a school-wide process with uniform policies concerning testing and cut off points. In the absence of such policies, the individual teacher or teachers at any year level can carry out their own system of identification. The major purpose of the identification process is to determine which children have need for special educational provisions, supplements or alternatives to regular mainstream instruction and to pinpoint or diagnose their special needs.

Generally, we believe that suitable identification can be accomplished by selecting children who score at or above the 95th percentile on one or more major areas of an achievement test (e.g., reading, mathematics, language, reference skills, etc.), have IQs above 125, and/or score well on a rating scale completed by the teacher. The decision to include a child in a program should not be assumed to be a positive classification as "gifted", but rather an indication that the child is one who has special needs not being served or met by the regular school program.

We feel strongly that gifted children should not be singled out as distinct, separate and totally different from other children. They should be viewed simply as "children" who have special needs. They should not be called "gifted", and their parents should not be led to believe that their children constitute a unique diagnostic category. Above all, there should be no implication in the identification process that giftedness is hereditary.

The identification process should be flexible and inclusive rather than exclusive (Tuttle & Becker, 1983). Children may show up at any time during the year, not just at a particular identification time. Children who are not identified as gifted but who have special talents may join a gifted cluster working on a project for