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THE Parallel Curriculum

A Design to Develop High Potential
and Challenge High-Ability Learners

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2

An Overview of the Parallel Curriculum Model

The model for developing curriculum presented in this book is called the Parallel Curriculum Model. It proposes the possibility of developing appropriately challenging curriculum using one, two, three, or four “parallel” ways of thinking about course content (Figure 2.1). The term “parallel” indicates several formats through which educators can approach curriculum design in the same subject or discipline. “Parallel” should not be taken to mean that the formats or approaches must remain separate and distinct in planning or in classroom use.

All curriculum takes its basic definition and purpose from what the Parallel Curriculum Model calls “The Core Curriculum” because this parallel reflects the essential nature of a discipline as experts in that discipline conceive and practice the discipline. A second parallel proposed by the Model is called “The Curriculum of Connections” and expands on the Core Curriculum by guiding students to make connections within or across disciplines, across times, across cultures or places, or in some combination of those elements. A third parallel in the Model is the “Curriculum of Practice,” which guides learners in understanding and applying the facts, concepts, principles, and methodologies of the discipline in ways that encourage student growth toward expertise in the discipline. The fourth and final parallel proposed by the Model is “The Curriculum of Identity.” Curriculum developed according to this parallel guides students in coming to understand their own strengths, preferences, values, and commitment by reflecting on their own development through the lens of contributors and professionals in a field of study. The Parallel Curriculum Model assumes that teachers may create appropriately challenging curriculum by using any one parallel (at appropriate levels of intellectual demand) or a combination of the parallels (at appropriate levels of intellectual demand) as a framework for thinking about and planning curriculum.

Figure 2.1. The Parallel Curriculum: A Model for Curriculum Planning

| The Core or Basic Curriculum | The Curriculum of Connections | The Curriculum of Practice | The Curriculum of Identity |
|---|--|--|---|
| <p>The Core Curriculum is the foundational curriculum that establishes a rich framework of knowledge, understanding, and skills most relevant to the discipline. It is inclusive of and extends state and district expectations. It is the starting point or root system for all of the parallels in this model.</p> <p>The Core or Basic Curriculum:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Is built on key facts, concepts, principles, and skills essential to discipline • Is coherent in its organization • Is purposefully focused and organized to achieve essential outcomes • Promotes understanding rather than rote learning • Is taught in a meaningful context • Causes students to grapple with ideas and questions, using both critical and creative thinking • Is mentally and affectively engaging and satisfying to learners • Results in evidence of worthwhile student production | <p>This curriculum is derived from and extends the Core Curriculum. It is designed to help students encounter and interact with the key concepts, principles, and skills in a variety of settings, times, and circumstances.</p> <p>The Curriculum of Connections is designed to help students think about and apply key concepts, principles, and skills:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In a range of instances throughout the discipline • Across disciplines • Across time and time periods • Across locations • Across cultures • Across times, locations, and cultures • Through varied perspectives • As impacted by various conditions (social, economic, technological, political, etc.) • Through the eyes of various people who affected and are affected by the ideas • By examining links between concepts and development of the disciplines | <p>This curriculum is derived from and extends the Core Curriculum. Its purpose is to help students function with increasing skill and confidence in a discipline as professionals would function. It exists for the purpose of promoting students' expertise as practitioners of the discipline.</p> <p>The Curriculum of Practice asks students to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Understand the nature of the discipline in a real world application manner • Define and assume a role as a means of studying the discipline • Understand the impact of this discipline on other disciplines and other disciplines on this discipline • Become a disciplinary problem solver rather than being a problem solver using the subject matter of the discipline • Understand and use the discipline as a means of looking at and making sense of the world • Develop a means of escaping the rut of certainty about knowledge • Comprehend the daily lives of workers or professionals in the discipline: working conditions, hierarchical structures, fiscal aspects of the work, peer or collegial dynamics • Define and understand the implications of internal and external politics that impact the discipline • Value and engage in the intellectual struggle of the discipline • Function as a producer in the discipline • Function as a scholar in the discipline | <p>This curriculum is derived from and extends the Core Curriculum. It is designed to help students see themselves in relation to the discipline both now and with possibilities for the future; understand the discipline more fully by connecting it with their lives and experiences; increase awareness of their preferences, strengths, interests, and need for growth; and think about themselves as stewards of the discipline who may contribute to it and/or through it. The Curriculum of Identity uses curriculum as a catalyst for self-definition and self-understanding, with the belief that by looking outward to the discipline, students can find a means of looking inward.</p> <p>The Curriculum of Identity asks students to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reflect on their skills and interests as they relate to the discipline • Understand ways in which their interests might be useful to the discipline and ways in which the discipline might serve as a means for helping them develop their skills and interests • Develop awareness of their modes of working as they relate to the modes of operation characteristic of the discipline • Reflect on the impact of the discipline in the world, and self in the discipline • Think about the impact of the discipline on the lives of others in the wider world • Take intellectual samplings of the discipline for the purpose of experiencing self in relation to the discipline and their implications • Examine the ethics and philosophy characteristic of the discipline and their implications • Project themselves into the discipline • Develop self in the context of the discipline and through interaction with the subject matter • Develop a sense of both pride and humility related to both self and the discipline |

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A Look at the Four Curriculum Parallels

Before taking a look at the four approaches to curriculum that the Parallel Curriculum Model proposes, it is important to specify three assumptions of the model.

- ▶ *There is no such thing as “the” gifted learner.* Some young people whom we might call gifted will manifest talents and abilities. Other young people of similar promise may have latent talents and abilities. Some may have strengths in multiple areas. Others will have a single area of strength. Some highly able young people will be afire with motivation to learn. Others will underachieve. Further, the students will differ in the degree to which they have realized their abilities, readiness for school tasks, personal interests, manners of learning, and attitudes about school. Some gifted learners will achieve in spite of us, some because of us, and others will not achieve because we do not reach them. Some students who are not identified as gifted at a given point in school will later encounter opportunity, support, passion for learning, or some other catalyst for growth that propels them to become remarkable contributors to society. We are wise, therefore, to look at curriculum that taps the potential of many learners.
- ▶ *Curriculum and instruction for gifted learners must be flexible enough to address the broad array of needs represented in that population.* There can be no “standard” curriculum that will develop the possibilities in the very non-standard population of learners. While there are principles that guide effective curriculum and instruction for all learners, and principles that guide effective curriculum and instruction for learners whose giftedness is evident, there is no single curricular or instructional approach that will be adequate for all high potential learners. Any model of curriculum development that seeks to serve the broad population in which high potential learners exist will have to promote flexibility to match curriculum to learner.
- ▶ *Teachers who are effective in developing high potential will be curriculum decision makers.* Such teachers will, of necessity, develop comfort and competence in their subject areas and have a broad understanding of high-quality curriculum. Further, they will develop expertise in applying principles of high-quality curriculum and instruction in ways that develop the unique capacities and interests of the range of advanced learners.

With these underlying beliefs, the model proposed here is heuristic rather than algorithmic. That is, it attempts to provide useful guidelines for thinking about what and how we teach a broad range of learners who display, or might display, high potential. It does not purport to be a recipe. It cannot be prescriptive. Recall that the parallel curricula described in the Parallel Curriculum Model can be used in any order. In addition, it is important to recall that the parallels in the Parallel Curriculum Model can be used singly or in combination. Drawing on the flexibility

of the model in response to the current cognitive and affective status of a given learner allows curriculum designers to generate learning experiences that are genuinely responsive to learner readiness and interest.

We invite teachers and other educators to think about the Parallel Curriculum Model, try it out, critique it—and ultimately, add to it and reshape it. This is the only approach to teaching that can both identify and develop the wide-ranging capacities of learners and of the educators who work with them. We begin with an introduction to the Model’s four parallels. Later chapters will provide specific guidance in applying the parallels to curriculum design.

The Core Curriculum

The Nature of the Effective Core Curriculum

The Core Curriculum is the starting point for all effective curricula. The Core Curriculum is defined by the nature of a given discipline. The purpose of the Core Curriculum is to ensure that students develop a framework of knowledge, understanding, and skills that prepare the students for a journey toward expertise in a subject area or discipline. National, state, and/or district learning goals for students should be reflected in the Core Curriculum. Figure 2.2 capsules the intent of the Core Curriculum Parallel.

Among the driving questions posed by the Core Curriculum are the following:

- ▷ What does this information mean?
- ▷ Why does this information matter?
- ▷ How is the information organized to help people use it better?
- ▷ How do these ideas make sense?
- ▷ What are they for?
- ▷ How does this thing work?
- ▷ How can I use these ideas and skills?

The Core Curriculum:

- ▶ Stems from the key facts, concepts, principles, and skills essential to a discipline and reflects what experts in the discipline find most important

Figure 2.2. The Intent of the Core Curriculum Parallel

The Core or Basic Curriculum

The Core Curriculum is the foundational curriculum that should establish a rich framework of knowledge, understanding, and skills most relevant to the discipline. It is inclusive of and extends state and district expectations. It is the starting point or root system for the parallel curricula.

The Core or Basic Curriculum:

- Is built on key facts, concepts, principles, and skills essential to the discipline
- Is coherent in its organization
- Is purposefully focused and organized to achieve essential outcomes
- Promotes understanding rather than rote learning
- Is taught in a meaningful context
- Causes students to grapple with ideas and questions, using both critical and creative thinking
- Is mentally and affectively engaging and satisfying to learners
- Results in evidence of worthwhile student production

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- ▶ Is coherent in its organization so that it helps students build knowledge, understanding, and skills systematically and organize what they learn in ways that develop students' abilities to remember, make meaning, and use what they know in unfamiliar situations

Our best understanding of teaching and learning suggests that virtually all students should work with a core curriculum characterized by this sort of quality and purpose. However, as students demonstrate advanced or advancing talent, ability, and/or interests in particular facets of the Core Curriculum, those students will need to work at escalating levels of intellectual demand in order to experience challenge and to have the opportunity to develop their capacities.

Ascending Intellectual Demand and the Core Curriculum

“Ascending intellectual demand” is always relative to the need of a particular learner. In relation to the core curriculum, ascending intellectual demand can be achieved in many ways, among them the following: