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I

Developing talents in the middle grades: The debate continues

Thomas O. Erb

The charge has been levelled at middle level schools that they tend to bore high ability students much of the time. In short, it is claimed, many of these students' academic needs are not being met. This is a wrenching charge for middle school people to take. The parent of two gifted children put it this way (National Training Program for Gifted Education, 1996):

If that child is gifted and needs special services, then they [sic] should have it. I don't see it as an either/or. I don't see it as a reward. I see it as just serving the needs of the children, whatever those needs may be (p. 48).

A talented maths student offered this perspective (National Training Program for Gifted Education, 1996):

If I were in a regular maths class, not an advanced maths class, I wouldn't feel challenged, because I need to be in the accelerated [one] because I've already learned all there is to [know] about the normal one (p. 50).

How do middle school advocates reconcile their belief in the obligation to meet the needs of all young adolescents with the charge that high ability students are being shortchanged in the process of teaching all students in heterogeneous classes?

Even the shadow studies that have appeared in the middle school literature, lend support to the contention that middle school classrooms are generally boring, unchallenging places. Regular middle grades students, those not identified as gifted, were quoted in Lounsbury and Clark (1990) as describing their classes in these ways:

- Some were too easy. (p. 76)
- They are rather boring. (p. 86)
- I don't really feel challenged. (p. 98)





My preservice students who have examined the six shadow studies in Lounsbury and Clark (1990) were drawn to the conclusion that worksheets and teacher talk dominate the lives of eighth graders. With few exceptions, students have little student-to-student interaction. In fact, they have very little student-teacher interaction: Mostly teachers talk at students; there is little 'connecting' going on in the majority of the classrooms depicted.

The exceptions to this dismal picture in the Lounsbury and Clark book, *Inside Grade Eight*, are a couple of shadow studies done on interdisciplinary teams where students were engaged in cooperative learning and frequent hands-on projects where they conversed with fellow students and teachers about their work.

Middle school classrooms are not supposed to be boring, disengaging places. They are to be characterised by integrated curriculum, or at least interdisciplinary curriculum, where students work at their own paces and at their own levels to produce projects that demonstrate meaningful applications of the knowledge they are acquiring. Students are supposed to be investigating the questions that they themselves are asking about the world and their place in it. They are supposed to be solving problems as they work in interdependent work groups. All of this effort is directed toward producing products and performances for some real audience. Yet we hear time and again that teachers just cannot meet these goals with all the diversity – developmental, academic and emotional – of students that they encounter in their classrooms.

Since William Alexander (1965/1995) first described a new concept for a school in the middle, the need for middle schools has been justified on the grounds that young adolescents require educational programs that are developmentally appropriate. Whatever the needs of young adolescents are, there is little disagreement with Mead's (1965) observation that young adolescents are more unlike each other than they have ever been or will be again later in life. Developmental appropriateness has always been tempered with developmental diversity. In the physical domain, all five Tanner Stages are present in a typical middle level school. Cognitive development spans early concrete operations to solid formal operations. Social-emotional development spans the range from adult-pleasing preadolescents to emotionally mature young adults.

The developmental diversity is accompanied by other differences that have been shown to influence learning. Gender makes a difference, especially for girls in maths and science. There are studies that have documented the advantages of single-sex classes in maths and science to better meet the academic needs of girls (Streitmatter, 1997, under review). Ethnicity makes a difference. We can find in the literature examples of programs designed to meet the special needs of Black males (Gill, 1995). Certainly, ability, interest and motivation make a difference in learning. These differences cut across different learners in different ways. For example, consider these two hypothetical, yet very real profiles of young adolescents: A late-concrete-operations, Tanner 3, emotionally mature, Black female, of average ability in maths and high motivation in English will have

II

Middle schools, ability grouping, and gifted students: The continuing conundrum

Paul S. George

Recent years have witnessed an unfortunately deep rift develop, and continue to widen, between advocates (both educators and parents) for the special needs of gifted students and other educators not directly associated with gifted education. These differences seem to be felt most sensitively at the middle school level. While this chapter may possibly contribute to the further estrangement of these groups, any lasting rapprochement between or among the parties involved cannot be permanently achieved by avoiding a full, open and caring confrontation of the issues which divide the groups. Hence, what follows is intended to be just that – as complete a catalogue of criticisms and concerns about the current status of gifted education and the middle school as can be mustered, delivered in the belief that this sort of ventilation is an unpleasant but necessary part of the process of reconciliation.

These charges are proffered with the full knowledge that the reaction from many readers is likely to be lightning swift and largely negative. It is hoped that out of the interactions which will follow, heated though they may be, educators can arrive at a more accurate and informed understanding of the situation from a variety of perspectives that will ultimately lead to planning for schools that more fully meet the needs of all middle school students. If advocates for the gifted and those with other priorities are never able to engage in this sort of discussion, schools which respond to our leadership will rarely be able to put in place programs which effectively challenge, equitably, all students with learning experiences which prepare them for life in the community of tomorrow.

Let me attempt to state forthrightly my biases and my position at the outset. I believe that Dewey (1944) was correct when he argued that the way in which we organise and operate our schools determines to a large degree, or at least mirrors, the sort of communities we live in as adults. He was also correct, I think, when he suggested that what the best and wisest members of the community want for their own children must be what the community wants for all its children (Dewey, 1944). I believe that, in order to live together in peace and justice as citizens of communities, states and the nation, we must work to ensure in all phases of our lives together, including middle school, that every member of those communities participates equally in the opportunities available. I believe that we must



Proposition one

There is no hard evidence to suggest that gifted and talented (GT) students cannot have virtually all of their reasonable academic needs met in the context of the regular classroom.

Academic achievement in our schools

Regular classrooms in American schools are as good as or better than they have ever been. The continued denigration of the regular classroom by advocates of the gifted as unfit for their students is not based on fact and is an unprofessional disservice to American public education. Ironically, the harsh criticism of the regular classroom will contribute to the growing general public disaffection with the public schools in a way that also eventually damages programs for gifted and talented students. It is in the interest of all students for educators of the gifted to join in support, rather than condemnation, of public school education.

Consider some of the now established facts of academic achievement in American public schools, including the middle level, revealed by reviewers of research such as Gerald Bracey and the once secret, now well-known, federal government's Sandia National Laboratory Report. (Charged by the Bush administration to investigate achievement in American public schools, the researchers at Sandia National Laboratories turned in a careful, scholarly analysis of the evidence. The report, full of good news about American schools, was the exact opposite of what the Bush administration wanted to help so publication and discussion of the report was forbidden by our national government) Among the conclusions now readily available to the public as a result of the discovery and eventual publication of that report (Carson, Huelskamp, & Woodall, 1992) are these:

1. Only one in 20 American business people is critical of the academic skills of their workers. American business people are much more concerned about the social skills of their employees than their academic skills, the same social skills that middle school educators have striven to develop through advisory programs and team organisation.
2. American students are near the top in reading on international comparison tests (Bracey, 1993a).
3. American public schools and the post-secondary education that follows, actually produce more mathematicians and scientists than needed (Carson, Huelskamp, & Woodall, 1992).
4. Performance on standardised tests (like the SAT and the GRE) has been steady or improving for the last 20 years. Since the early 1970s, scores on

