

# Introduction

**T**alk to teachers in any middle school in the country and chances are one of their greatest concerns is the increasing range of abilities and special needs they face every day in their classes. Question a little further and you'll find they work with IEP's, 504 plans, social skills, or recovery groups of many kinds, "pull-outs" for reading, "push-ins" for math, aides who accompany students with Asperger's syndrome or a physical challenge, and more! Then ask, "What about your top kids?" Typical response: "Sigh...I wish I could do more for them, but there's just not enough time!" That's often accompanied by the pervasive myth: "Luckily, these kids will do fine on their own." Even today, preservice teacher preparation provides little or no opportunity for learning about gifted, talented, advanced, and high-achieving or high potential students; so even the most committed middle school teacher rarely provides for the needs of top students on a daily basis. In states like Tennessee where value-added assessments examine each student's individual annual progress, it is those students in the top quintile who often show the least growth over the course of a school year. And what about those students whose gifts and talents are lying dormant, just beneath the surface, waiting to be uncovered by a teacher who is providing all students with challenging opportunities for learning and inviting students with hidden potential to take risks?

Given limited resources, the accountability demands of No Child Left Behind, and the large number of struggling learners, it is, indeed, hard to adequately meet the special needs of students who learn rapidly, already possess vast stores of

background knowledge, and possess specific talents and gifts. But every child has the right to come to school and learn something new each day: not remain bored while waiting for others to catch up, not serving as a junior teacher, not being isolated and reading alone in a back corner. As the last two Carnegie reports reiterated, middle school is a turning point for most of America's young people, including our brightest and most capable middle level students.

The purpose of this book is to provide teachers with some practical tools for understanding and beginning to meet the needs of gifted, talented, high-achieving, and high potential middle schoolers. This is not an easy task, but committed teachers can add these strategies to their repertoire and enhance learning for their high-end students as well as other interested and motivated learners. National Middle School Association and National Association for Gifted Children have joined forces to support these efforts, realizing that there has been a gap in middle school practices related to gifted and talented youngsters. This is evidenced by the Joint Position Statement, "Meeting the Needs of High Ability and High Potential Learners in the Middle Grades," issued in fall 2005 (see p. 49 in the appendix). With this statement's Call to Action inspiring our practice, teachers will develop a better understanding of their brightest students while using some of the strategies and resources suggested here.

Finally, a note about language: All words carry both their denotation and the baggage of connotation, their emotional meanings. Throughout this volume, I've chosen to use the word *gifted*, primarily because it is the shortest of the terms that refer to the group of students about whom we are concerned. It is not meant to be exclusive or elitist, or to refer to those formally identified as gifted. In this book, *gifted* refers not only to those who may be so designated, but also to those with exceptional learning potential and others who are advanced or accelerated learners in one or more content areas.

## Chapter One

# Understanding Gifted Learners in the Middle Grades

**M**iddle school is a period of transition for all students. Gifted learners face the same challenges and developmental tasks of their peers: developing friendships, accepting their changing bodies and emerging sexuality, understanding themselves and their identities, re-defining their place in their family, and finding their niche in the world. But there are some traits of gifted learners that may complicate this process for them, layers that are often misunderstood or ignored by teachers and administrators.

### **Intellectual development**

Translating brain research into concepts that apply to the middle school classroom holds much promise in the future. We know that our brightest students learn faster, have advanced and in-depth background knowledge and skills in one or more areas, and are more abstract than concrete thinkers (having made or started this transition earlier than many of their age peers). They have the ability for extended concentration on a single subject or task, and this energy is sometimes focused on a narrow interest or skill (mastering Flash animation, reading every book by a single author, teaching themselves to play the guitar, or filling journals with hip hop lyrics). Rather than learning at the pace set by the teacher, advanced students seem to leap along with flashes of insight and unique conceptual connections.

Gifted students often have a deeper understanding of morality and ethics and a greater need for logical explanations. Their analytical and intuitive orientations contribute to impatience with hypocrisy and unfairness, and they may

## Chapter Four

# Grouping for Instruction

**W**hen and how should middle school teachers group students for instruction? Since there is no easy answer to this question, the most honest and reasonable response is, "It depends."

Some middle schools successfully employ looping, multiage, or more integrative types of curricula where classroom groups form and re-form regularly, if not daily. In such classrooms, where their voice and involvement in learning are critical, students are not formally grouped, and students of all abilities work successfully and productively together, often pursuing self-selected, individual assignments as part of a small group's research project. While this is probably the ideal situation for young adolescents, the reality is that in more traditional classrooms, teachers do group for instruction in a variety of ways explained in this chapter.

Understanding terminology about groups and grouping is essential. Grouping is not tracking, and the difference is more than semantics. Grouping makes instruction more efficient; it should be flexible with students moving in and out of groups as needed. Grouping can take place within a classroom, by classroom, and across classrooms and grade levels. Students can be grouped by ability, interest, learning style, or any other criterion that makes learning more responsive. Grouping occurs when student needs dictate.

For example, in one middle school, 15 eighth-grade students with advanced science knowledge and skills were about to be co-enrolled in the ninth-grade honors biology class at the high school several miles away; but the high school

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## Want to Learn More? *(continued)*

Tomlinson, C.A. (2001). ***How to differentiate instruction in mixed-ability classrooms*** (2nd ed.). Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.

Tomlinson, C.A., & Doubet, K. (2006). ***Smart in the middle grades: Classrooms that work for bright middle schoolers***. Westerville, OH: National Middle School Association.

Winebrenner, S. (2001). ***Teaching gifted kids in the regular classroom***. Minneapolis, MN: Free Spirit Press.

**<http://www.smcm.edu/academics/EdStudy/d7-Proj/Projects/ResearchSites/acbrowning/Strategies/CurrComp.htm>**

Fifth grade science example. This compacting example is adapted from an example in the article "Using Curriculum Compacting to Challenge the Above-Average," by Sally M. Reis and Joseph S. Renzulli (1992).

**<http://www.metagifted.org/topics/gifted/curriculum/compacting/>**

Example of a sixth grade compacted unit.

**<http://www.ed.gov/pubs/ToolsforSchools/curc.html>**

Curriculum Compacting

**<http://www.gifted.uconn.edu/nrcgt/newsletter/fall99/fall1996.html>**

Curriculum Compacting: A Necessity for Academic Advancement by Del Siegle, Fall 1999, NRC/GT.

**<http://www.hoagiesgifted.org>**

An excellent resource for parents and teachers dealing with all aspects of giftedness and gifted education including online course options.

