2. ENGAGING DIFFERENT TYPES OF GIFTED LEARNERS

INTRODUCTION

In the dark ages of education, school was teacher-oriented, rather than student-centered. The role of teachers was to pour knowledge into the empty vessels with folded hands seated in front of them. The student’s role was to master the skills of reading, writing, spelling, and calculation through rote learning and repetition, at the same rate as the rest of the class. Those who mastered these skills faster were forced to sit and wait for the others or were given “More Of The Same” (MOTS) work to keep them busy. Those who mastered the skills more slowly—and who learned differently—were publicly humiliated. In some settings, the enterprise of schooling has not progressed. Marginalized, unique learners who were schooled in this manner still bear the scars.

The 21st century has born witness to heightened awareness and appreciation of learning styles, as well as variations in rates of learning. However, this enlightenment is spotty: it is found in some schools with some teachers, not others. A case in point: a profoundly gifted visual-spatial learner with dyslexia and dysgraphia attended a prestigious private school in the United States. His mother wrote that the Head of the School:

was adamant that “her teachers didn’t have time to deal with different learning styles.” Any child who didn’t fit her mold of sitting quietly in class, doing what they were told, not asking questions…was simply to be bullied and shamed into submission. (GDC Parent Questionnaire, October 22, 2014)

The gifted do not just “get there” faster; they learn in a qualitatively different manner. They yearn for complexity and abstract concepts, and they become disengaged with rote memorization and the practice of skills. However, not all gifted children are alike. “The range of scores of children in the top 1% on IQ—from 135 to more than 200—is as broad as the range of scores from the 2nd percentile…to the 98th” (Gross, 2009, p. 338). Five different levels of giftedness have been identified (Wasserman, 2003), and each requires specific educational modifications. (See Silverman, 2013 for more information.)
Levels of Giftedness

120 – 129 IQ mildly gifted
130 – 144 IQ moderately gifted
145 – 159 IQ highly gifted
160 – 174 IQ exceptionally gifted
175+ IQ profoundly gifted

Giftedness occurs in all ethnic, linguistic, geographic and socio-economic groups; it is color blind and gender fair. Natural propensities, unique interests, and the drive to absorb all that is known about a topic, lead the gifted in a multitude of directions. Access to Internet and early reading ability can diversify this group even further. “The higher the IQ or greater the intellectual capacity, the more individual differences” will be found (Tolan, 1999, p. 148). Auditory, visual and kinesthetic modalities vary dramatically within this population. A child with a brilliant mind may be unable to write. A growing number of gifted students have disabilities: the twice exceptional. Gifted children have different learning styles: some learn more effectively in a sequential manner, while others are more spatially oriented and struggle with sequential learning. An effective program is tailored to all of these individual differences.

DIFFERENT WAYS OF LEARNING

The field of gifted education has embraced many models that honor various constellations of learning strengths. One way of conceptualizing the multiplicity of abilities is through theories of multiple intelligences. In 1938, Louis Thurstone constructed a theory of nine primary mental abilities. Thurstone opened the door for many theorists who followed. By far, the most ambitious theory of multiple intelligences, Joy P. Guilford’s (1956) The Structure of Intellect, described 120 intelligences; the model eventually expanded to 150 intelligences. The Structure of Intellect Learning Abilities Test (Meeker, Meeker & Roid, 1985), based on Guilford’s model, has served as a method of qualifying for gifted programs. Dr. Mary Meeker, a student of Guilford’s, and her husband, Robert, founded SOI Systems in Vida, Oregon, which provides training in the model, the assessment tool, and instructional programs (www.soisystems.com). In Frames of Mind, Howard Gardner (1983) postulated seven intelligences; two more have been added, and others are under consideration. Several books and articles are available to guide teachers in customizing education to multiple intelligences (e.g., Armstrong, 2009). François Gagné (1985, 2012) created the Differentiated Model of Giftedness and Talents (DMGT). DMGT includes six domains of giftedness, along with nine talents. It serves as the theoretical basis for many gifted programs in Australia.

Personality theories gave birth to learning style models. Carl Jung (1923/1938) conceived of two basic orientations: extraversion and introversion. In addition, he described four functions: sensing, intuition, thinking and feeling. Katherine