The Underserved: Primary Grade Gifted

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The Underserved: Primary Grade Gifted

Abstract
Gifted primary grade students, those in grades one through three, have interests and abilities similar to their age mates. The main difference is the depth to which they want to learn and explore these interests. However, due to the lack of programming for this age group, untrained teachers, and parents who are uncertain of their role, these children are underserved when it comes to meeting their needs. There are three issues that contribute to the primary grade gifted student being underserved. The first issue is lack of programming. The majority of educational programs for gifted students are designed for students in third grade or above. Programs for younger children need to be developed with a focus on blending what is developmentally appropriate with the challenging activities that they need. The second issue is that of teacher preparation. Primary grade teachers generally have little background in identifying and working with gifted children. . . When parents approach them with information about their child, the teachers do not know where to start. In-services that focus on gifted students and encouragement to attend workshops would benefit all students and the teachers. The third issue relates to the role of the parents. Parents are usually the ones who recognize the potential the child has. Quite often, however, they are not believed by school professionals or they hold back information for fear of what will be said about them or their child. What is important to remember is that the sooner the teacher and parents work together the better off the child will be. The earlier the intervention the more effective it will be for the child and his/her learning. Concerns about the potential problems of underachievement, poor self concept and negative attitudes about learning, also supports early intervention. Self-concepts and attitudes about learning are established early. If a child is left unidentified he/she may try to “blend in” so as not to appear different. Gifted primary grade students have a desire to learn new things and often look at school as the place to do this. It is disillusioning for them to arrive at school and go over material they already know. The idea is established that school is not a place to learn. They do enough to get by and possibly do not reach their potential. The gifted primary grade student is an at-risk student unless the primary grade teachers are willing to become teachers of the gifted.

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The Underserved:
Primary Grade Gifted

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Abstract

Gifted primary grade students, those in grades one through three, have interests and abilities similar to their age mates. The main difference is the depth to which they want to learn and explore these interests. However, due to the lack of programming for this age group, untrained teachers, and parents who are uncertain of their role, these children are underserved when it comes to meeting their needs.

There are three issues that contribute to the primary grade gifted student being underserved. The first issue is lack of programming. The majority of educational programs for gifted students are designed for students in third grade or above. Programs for younger children need to be developed with a focus on blending what is developmentally appropriate with the challenging activities that they need.

The second issue is that of teacher preparation. Primary grade teachers generally have little background in identifying and working with gifted children. When parents approach them with information about their child, the teachers do not know where to start. In-services that focus on gifted students and encouragement to attend workshops would benefit all students and the teachers.

The third issue relates to the role of the parents. Parents are usually the ones who recognize the potential the child has. Quite often, however, they are not believed by school professionals or they hold back information for fear of what will be said about them or their child. What is important to remember is that the sooner the teacher and parents work together the better off the child will be. The earlier the intervention the more effective it will be for the child and his/her learning.

Concerns about the potential problems of underachievement, poor self-concept and negative attitudes about learning, also supports early intervention.
Self-concepts and attitudes about learning are established early. If a child is left unidentified he/she may try to “blend in” so as not to appear different. Gifted primary grade students have a desire to learn new things and often look at school as the place to do this. It is disillusioning for them to arrive at school and go over material they already know. The idea is established that school is not a place to learn. They do enough to get by and possibly do not reach their potential. The gifted primary grade student is an at-risk student unless the primary grade teachers are willing to become teachers of the gifted.
The Underserved: Primary Grade Gifted

There is a quote from Emile Zola on my calendar that says, “The artist is nothing without the gift, but the gift is nothing without work.” How true that is! Any gift, from writing poetry to scoring hockey goals, needs work. What would a dancer be if he did not practice, stretch, and perfect his ability? The same is true with education, especially education of the gifted. A gifted child has been given the gift of an exceptional ability. She may be able to read and comprehend at a rapid rate. Maybe she can work out complicated math problems in her head and maybe he can draw pictures with incredible detail. It is unfair not to provide them the opportunity to stretch and develop their abilities.

Contributions to the Problem

What I have noticed in my schools and from talking to teachers in other districts is that gifted primary grade students, those in grades first through third, are underserved. There are three issues that contribute to this problem. The first is that the majority of programs for the gifted are designed for older students (Roedell, 1989). Therefore, many schools do not provide a program for their younger gifted students. The second reason is that primary grade teachers often lack preparation to work with gifted children. They do not know the resources that are available to assist them in serving the primary gifted student. The third reason is that the parents of gifted children quite often do not know what their role is. They do not know whether to demand services or keep their thoughts to themselves.

The beginning of the solution starts in college classrooms and at in-services. It ends in the very classroom that the child inhabits, but first let’s examine the contributing issues.

Contributing Issue #1: Lack of Programs

Gifted primary grade students have many interests and abilities and demonstrate them in a variety of ways. Their interests are similar to their age mates,
but the depth to which they want to learn about the topic is much greater (Wolfle, 1989). Quite often schools do not identify students for gifted programs before grade three. Consequently gifted programs are designed to meet the needs of older students. They are built on the premise that the student is capable of carrying out an extensive project with minimal help (Roedell, 1989). Primary grade gifted students do not always possess the needed skills for this type of project. Students in this group are beyond their classmates, however, in one or more dimension. They need a curriculum that is expanded to meet their needs.

Contributing Issue #2: Classroom Teachers

Since a program is often unavailable within the school for the primary gifted child the responsibility of challenging and stretching the student's mind falls on the classroom teacher. This can be an issue for a couple of reasons. First, rarely are primary grade teachers formally educated to work with gifted students. They may not recognize the characteristics, both enjoyable and annoying, of the gifted child. They may not know how to begin differentiating the curriculum to meet the student's needs. They do not know whom to ask for assistance. The second reason is that, unfortunately, there are some teachers who do not like gifted children (Kennedy, 1995). The study conducted by Archambault et al. (1993) surveyed third and fourth grade classroom teachers and the interaction they had with gifted and average ability students. The study found that the classroom teachers made few if any modifications for gifted students (Archambault et al., 1993). Classroom teachers may see gifted primary students as an extra burden and may ignore them, embarrass them, or harass them (Kennedy, 1995). On top of all these things teachers also have to work with parents.

Contributing Issue #3: Parents

The way a child feels about learning depends on the attitude of the parents
toward learning. How the parent views the child's ability is also a key factor in the child's attitude (Koopmans-Dayton & Feldhusen, 1987). First, they are proud of their child's ability. Surprisingly, though, some parents are very much against their children being identified as gifted or of having potential (Wright & Borland, 1993). They may feel uncomfortable about public displays of this ability. They may worry about how to meet their child's needs. They may even be accused of "hothousing" or pushing the child (Gross, 1999). This can lead to guilt or even attempts to decelerate the child's learning by hiding books or other materials (Robinson, Roedell, & Jackson, 1979). Their negative or apprehensive reactions stem from their previous experiences with giftedness, either their own or that of someone close to them. They worry their child will have emotional problems or will not be accepted by his/her peers. Some parents are just unaware of the fact that their child is "different" or they assume the teacher is capable of recognizing the child's gifts and talents (Smutny, Walker, & Meckstroth, 1997)

Suggested Improvements

The question comes down to, "What needs to be done to improve service to the gifted primary grade student?" There are several ways, from better preservice and in-service preparation to rethinking what a classroom looks like. The school district or teacher needs to take into account what kind of support is available and what goal is to be reached. The following suggestions start at the undergraduate level and end in the child's own classroom.

Suggestion #1: Service in the Classroom

The lack of programs for the primary grade gifted child is responsible for these students remaining in their classrooms. They are in need of modifications in the regular classroom curriculum.

In her article, "Modifying Regular Classroom Curricula for High Ability Students,"
McGrail (1998) lists three options to use for modification. The first is lesson modification. She says that this can be accomplished by asking open-ended questions. This stimulates higher order thinking skills and presents opportunities to share personal opinions. Open-ended questions can be included in class discussions and also on assignments.

The second way to modify is through assignment modification (McGrail, 1998). It is unfair to ask high ability students to complete an assignment that they find irrelevant because it presents no new learning for them. Instead they should be given the opportunity to compact their curriculum. Compacting is when students are allowed to reduce or skip those assignments in areas where they have demonstrated their mastery. They use the time they “buy back” to pursue enrichment or alternate activities that build on their strengths (McGrail, 1998).

The need for compacting can be determined by pretesting the student, observing that a student generally finishes assignments quickly and accurately, or by noting that the student demonstrates high ability in an area, although not necessarily on daily work. A lack of motivation could be the cause for poor daily work. After a need has been determined, a written plan must be created. This plan lists what has to be done, the alternate choices, and the time frame for completion. The student may choose to do an independent project with the understanding that he/she will become the “resident expert” and share it with the class (Winebrenner, 1992).

The third form of adaptation that McGrail (1998) suggested is to modify the schedule. A possible schedule modification is cluster grouping. Cluster grouping is easier to implement when the number of students is small and a separate class is not available (Feldhusen & Feldhusen, 2001). A cluster group occurs when all the gifted students from a grade level, usually between 6-8 students, are assigned to one classroom because of their learning needs (Teno, 2000). The rest of the students are
Underserved 5

of mixed ability. This system allows the students to learn with others of a similar ability and also reduces the number of teachers required to develop curricular modifications (McGrail, 1998). It also is seen to be less disruptive for all the students.

The key to cluster grouping is the teacher. He/she needs to be willing to work with gifted students and should have education in working with this population of students. Collaboration is also a necessary piece of the clustering puzzle. There needs to be collaboration between the classroom teacher and gifted education coordinator. If there is not a coordinator then the teacher needs to know who is available to provide assistance. Cluster grouping is not just a one teacher, one class situation. It needs to be supported by the school district, the parents and the other teachers.

Suggestion #2: Teacher Preparation

The first step in developing better services for gifted primary students is in teacher education. The curriculum of undergraduates needs to include a specific course dealing with characteristics of the gifted child and ways to work with them. A primary educator needs an awareness of the special capabilities of the gifted child and those whose intellectual and academic skills are developing at a faster than average rate.

There are also primary teachers who have been teaching for several years and may not have had the opportunity for a course in gifted education. This means that the teachers need inservice opportunities to learn about gifted children and strategies for working with them. They also need to know who they can turn to for assistance in differentiating the curriculum (Hoover, Sayler, & Feldhusen, 1993).

In order for the gifted primary grade student to best be served there needs to be collaboration between the primary grade teacher and the gifted education specialist. Purcell and Leppien (1998) conducted a study about the collaboration between
classroom teachers and educators of the gifted. They discovered that the two groups have the same goal, “to provide high quality, differentiated learning activities for all students” (p. 172) but different expectations from the other group. Classroom teachers expected the specialists to be resourceful and able to communicate. Gifted education specialists expected that classroom teachers would know how to be flexible and would be able to “adapt, monitor and adjust curriculum and instruction” (p.177). Purcell and Leppien concluded that in order for collaboration to be successful both groups need an open mind and must be willing to “build a bridge” to understand how the other group is thinking. Teno (2000) expressed a similar perception, saying that with support from the specialist the classroom teacher was able to provide more comprehensive services for the gifted students in the cluster group.

Suggestion #3: Identifying the Parent’s Role

“Parents and teachers often view each other as adversaries” (Strip & Hirsch, 2001). The classroom teacher may see the parents as being pushy and the parents may feel the teacher is overlooking their child’s talents. Both groups need to remember that they each have the best interests of the child in mind.

Parents often struggle with knowing what their role is when it comes to their child’s education. They feel like outsiders due to a lack of information about what is going on at school and in the classroom. The more information they have the more involved they feel. It is important at the beginning of the year to make sure the parents know what the expectations are and how the parents can help. Riggs (1998) says that parents can provide three types of information. They can provide information about the student: interests, talents, attitude. Second, they can provide information about themselves: careers, hobbies, interests. Finally, they can provide information about the family. It may be important to know if there is currently a divorce in progress or a death in the family. This information helps create a picture of the child.
Besides keeping the teacher informed, they need to feel that they are a part of the child's learning. Teachers need to get the parents involved in the classroom. They not only get to experience time in their child's world, but they can also see that there are other students in the class who have needs (Strip & Hirsch, 2001). Teachers also need to invite the parents to come and share a hobby or talk about a trip they went on. Parents also make great advocates. They learn about the services that are available and then start wanting to know how they can request them for their children (Riggs, 1998).

Teachers need to remember that the child's first teachers and observers are his/her parents. Until the time the child appears in the classroom, his/her parents are the most knowledgeable about the child's abilities. Parents need to be encouraged to be part of, welcomed as a partner in, and informed of their child's education. They need to know what it means to be gifted and what they can do at home. Because they have information that may enlighten the teacher, communication between home and school is very important. Even though the child is gifted the entire family is affected (Damiani, 1997). Parents need to know they are not in it alone.

Conclusions: The Next Steps

The main challenge to meeting the needs of primary grade gifted students is the lack of service. This is an issue because of unavailable programs, unprepared teachers, and parents who are uncertain of their role in their child's education. They can be served but it will take changes in the education of undergraduates, in the continuing education of experienced teachers, and in the attitudes of school districts. The changes can start as simply as a one day in-service in the fall about gifted students and strategies to use in the classroom. All teachers in a building need to know what resources are available and who is available to assist them in differentiating lessons and curriculum.
Underserved primary grade gifted students are at risk for underachievement, poor self-concepts and negative attitudes towards school and learning. Self-concepts and attitudes about learning are established early. Gifted primary grade students have a desire to learn and they see school as "the place" to do this. It is disillusioning to arrive and learn nothing new. Cluster grouping, curriculum compacting, parent involvement and improved teacher in-services all provide gifted primary grade students with an improved chance of developing their abilities.
References


