

## **IX – Thou Shalt Group ... Fulltimely!**

From: Gagné, F. (2007). Ten commandments for academic talent development. *Gifted Child Quarterly*, 51, 93-118.

The ninth commandment enjoins educators to aim as much as possible for the full-time grouping of IGAT students. What are the bases for such a strong statement?

### **A Touchy Subject**

Before answering the why question of grouping, I must confess my recurring discomfort each time I have to broach that subject. Regular classroom teachers could easily perceive a demand for full-time, even part-time, grouping as a personal attack on their competence and/or dedication toward the IGAT students in their groups. And, most of the time, the audience at my keynote speeches comprises a majority of regular classroom teachers who are hoping to find at these conferences resources that will help them better answer the special learning needs of their bright achievers. To counter that initial understandable reaction, I need, before going any further, to make clear a point concerning the characteristics of the regular classroom teachers attending gifted and talented conferences. I would argue that they constitute a special, non-representative minority of teachers whose care for the special needs of IGAT students well exceeds that of their average peers in the profession. In other words, without denying that there are many more interested regular classroom colleagues than just those who attend G/T conferences, their number remains small, small enough for the total percentage not to exceed 10-15%. My point is that a vast majority of the colleagues of these teachers would not prioritize pursuing professional development activities associated with the education of IGAT students. This majority is the main target for my argument in favor of full-time IGAT grouping. By the way, I purposely use the expression IGAT grouping instead of ability grouping to make it clear that my arguments do not necessarily apply to all forms of grouping.

### **The Dearth of Enrichment**

Twenty-five years ago, the Richardson Foundation financed a large survey of enrichment practices in U.S. school districts. The results were published in a little book called “Educating able learners: Programs and promising practices” (Cox, Daniel, & Boston, 1985). That little book remains to this day one of those early readings in the field that strongly influenced my beliefs and convictions concerning the special enrichment provisions that ought to be prioritized. I cannot recommend it highly enough to everyone interested in the field; it overflows with common sense and practical ideas. The authors devote a chapter to summarize the results of their national survey of gifted services. They queried over four thousand school districts on their use of sixteen different types of enrichment provisions. For each type mentioned, they included a few questions that would allow them to judge how well that particular service was implemented in the district. The results were not very encouraging. First, about 75% of the districts

sampled did not complete the survey, not a very good sign of active involvement in IGAT services! Among the 1172 school districts sending back completed surveys, 5930 different services were mentioned, about 4.5 on average per district out of the sixteen options proposed. But, although the authors had defined very generous criteria for “substantial” implementation, they judged that fewer than half of these services reached a minimal threshold of quality. Just over 60% of the districts identified enrichment activities in the regular classroom as one of their services; the analysts judged that only 25% of them were offering it with a minimal quality level. Here are some of the problems mentioned.

If we look at the Enrichment programs [in the regular classroom], we see that 58 percent of those reporting said that the students were involved in enrichment activities of some kind for fewer than three hours a week. That hardly constitutes a “program” of enrichment. Those activities involved “all the class” in 26 percent of the cases, which means that there was no special effort among that 26 percent to offer programs specifically geared to the needs of able learners. (Cox et al., 1985, pp. 37-38)

About a decade later, the National Research Center of the Gifted and Talented (NRCGT) conducted a large survey of ongoing enrichment practices in U.S. school districts (Archambault et al, 1993). Again, the results were, to put it mildly, disquieting. A representative U.S. sample of over 7000 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> grade teachers received a detailed questionnaire “designed to determine the extent to which gifted and talented students are receiving differential education in the regular classroom setting” (p. 2). The results revealed that most of the enriching activities were offered less than a few times a month. Moreover, these activities usually targeted the whole class, leaving little specific enrichment for IGAT students. The authors concluded as follows.

The results of this survey paint a disturbing picture of the types of instructional services gifted students receive in regular classrooms across the United States. It is clear from the results that teachers in regular third and fourth grade classrooms make only minor modifications in the curriculum and their instruction to meet the needs of gifted students. (p. 5)

In summary, the vast majority of IGAT students in U.S. elementary and middle schools have almost no access to even the most basic forms of enrichment, let alone more advanced or consistent services. A few might stumble, one particular year, on a teacher who decides to offer them some occasional enrichment opportunities; others might encounter for a year or two occasional pull-out activities. But, ‘unfailingly’ is not part of the administrators’ vocabulary when it comes to dispensing appropriate special services to the IGAT population.

### **Mission Impossible!**

Some of my colleagues would probably argue that we could solve the situation by intensifying training activities with both acting teachers and those in undergraduate teacher training programs. Have they stopped to assess the immensity of the task? There are approximately 3.4 million teachers in the

American K-12 school system. How can so many individuals be reached? Even focusing on teachers in training remains a daunting task. How can that be done when the vast majority of these training programs already offer no significant amount of time to sensitize future teachers to the IGAT population? How can appropriate training be achieved when most of my colleagues in colleges of Education have to fight with hands and teeth to obtain a few hours' worth of basic information on that special population? On the subject of teacher training, Croft (2003) notes:

The most recent State of the States in Gifted and Talented Education Report (Council of State Directors of Programs of the Gifted, 1999), however, found that only 3 of 43 responding states indicated that classroom teachers have more than 3 contact hours in either preservice or inservice training in gifted education. (...) At least 8 states that require special programming for gifted students do not require any special training of the teachers who provide that programming. At least 19 states do not require any training in gifted education, even for teachers who work primarily with gifted students. (p. 566)

How can appropriate teacher training be possible when many states do not require any specialized training to teach IGAT populations, while others ask for just a minimal amount of hours on that subject?

Apart from the problem of population size, many other difficulties undermine efforts to build the skills—and attitudes—that will make regular classroom teachers effective dispensers of enrichment services. First, there is a problem of priorities; and the number one priority is to maximize the percentage of students who will pass and move on to the next grade level. Those at risk of failing are certainly not the IGAT students. Consequently, most teachers focus their efforts on helping those who struggle to achieve. Second, there is a problem of workload. The mainstreaming trend of the past two decades has increased the heterogeneity of the regular classroom. Many students with serious learning difficulties or behavior problems who were formerly placed in special classes have been brought back to regular classrooms. Teachers regularly complain that they are not given enough additional resources to cope with this increase of students with important learning difficulties. Third, a fairly large percentage of teachers are not attracted to IGAT students; many of them do not hesitate to openly express negative opinions toward these students (Gagné, 1983). What are the chances of modifying these attitudes and bringing these teachers to invest some of their energies into planning enrichment activities for their IGAT students?

In summary, looking at the numerous challenges facing those who would make it their goal to adequately prepare regular classroom teachers to offer enrichment to their few IGAT students, my prognosis is very clear: Mission Impossible!

### **Why Fulltimely**

The Richardson Survey revealed that the enrichment provision most frequently mentioned by the school districts who answered the survey was part-time special classes, commonly called pull-out classes. Nearly three-fourths (72%) said they used that option, although only about half of them (47%) were

judged to have substantial pull-out services. The authors of the Richardson study are not very kind toward the pull-out model, describing it as a prototype of the fragmented and discontinuous service approaches typical of U.S. school districts. They do acknowledge the many strengths of the pull-out model (e.g., ease and speed of implementation, training of just a few teachers, visibility, and ease of evaluation), but point out that “the weaknesses of the approach, however, are a cause for concern” (Cox, Daniel, & Boston, 1985, p. 43). The major weaknesses they identify include: (a) a part-time solution to a full-time problem; (b) what happens in the pullout classes is divorced from what happens in the child’s regular class; (c) they engender frictions between the gifted specialists and the regular classroom teachers; (d) they usually cost more than full-time programs; (e) they give a false sense of accomplishment to school administrators; and (f) schools that begin with pull-out classes tend to stay with that limited approach.

In a chapter devoted to “what works best: some promising practices,” Cox et al. (1985) briefly describe a series of programming initiatives they found exceptionally interesting, like schools that have adopted the International Baccalaureate Curriculum, long-term internships and mentor programs, Advanced Placement and early entrance to college, intensive summer schools, and special schools with a focus on specific subject matters (e.g., Arts, Math and Science, Music). Note that most of the prototypes described imply full-time grouping. It is worth noting that the research literature on grouping unequivocally confirms its positive academic and socio-affective impacts, so long as this administrative decision leads to a truly enriched curriculum (Kulik, 2003).

### **In a Nutshell**

The ninth commandment addresses a subject as controversial as the theme of acceleration. Yet, the opposition to the full-time grouping of IGAT students remains hard to understand in view of both the positive research evidence and the accumulated evidence on the almost total lack of any enrichment activities specifically targeting talented students in regular classrooms. The teachers’ priorities at all levels of the K-12 educational system target the learning difficulties of students at the other end of the achievement continuum. The low priority of IGAT students’ needs is reflected in their non-appearance in the curriculum of most pre-service teacher training programs. In that context, responding adequately to the special educational needs of fast learners becomes literally a “mission impossible!” That inescapable conclusion leads directly to the generalization of full-time grouping as the only way to create appropriate conditions for an enriched curriculum. To summarize the main advantages of full-time grouping, first it answers a permanent problem with a full-time solution; second, it facilitates the enrichment of all subject matters in the regular curriculum; finally, it does not require adding a (costly) teacher to the school’s personnel.

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