



NATIONAL ASSOCIATION FOR
Gifted Children

MIDDLE MATTERS

Letter from the Co-Chairs

MIDDLE MATTERS

- Is your Middle Division Newsletter!
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- Articles, stories, humor, or anything you'd like to share relating to Middle Level Gifted Education.
- 75—500 words (or more if need be)

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Dear Colleagues and Friends,

The NAGC conference was lively and many of us had a chance to meet face-to-face at the Pre-Conference on the NMSA/NAGC Joint Position Statement, the Division Business meeting, or Division tables at the larger organization's breakfast or evening "Meet and Greet." We still hope that some of you who attended will summarize sessions that were helpful to you for our *Middle Matters* editors, Jan Hersh and Brian Mays. As George Robinson is moving on to other exciting pursuits, we (Susannah Richards and Susan Rakow) were elected as the Division Co-Chairs. We are excited about working together and have already begun planning for next year's conference. In addition, we are in touch with NMSA to plan the 2006 Conference events.

Working as a gifted resource specialist in a middle school is not an easy task. While serving as strong and vocal advocates for gifted students, we also need to listen to our middle school administrators and teaching colleagues and be sensitive to the other challenges they face. We need to keep up with current research such as Karen Rogers' and innovations in practice such as Diane Heacox's 10 cluster guidelines, both of which can be found later in this issue. These will support our advocacy agenda as well as our students and teachers. We need to share our practices with each other - so PLEASE submit program descriptions, curriculum, and instructional

strategies that are working for you! Also send in questions, so we can gather our collective wisdom and help answer them. Topics that were specifically requested at the conference include: use of Pre-AP and Pre-IB programs, collaboration strategies with regular classroom teachers, and more information on social studies and science curriculum.

We need to cultivate the Middle Grades Division as a strong and supportive community, even if we only meet in cyberspace through this newsletter! We look forward to continuing to provide a strong public voice for middle grades gifted students, their educators, and their families.

Happy New Year! Feel free to contact us at any time....we look forward to hearing from you.

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Ten "Do's" for Successful Middle School Cluster Groupings

Diane Heacox, Ed.D.

Diane Heacox, author of the seminal book, Differentiating Instruction in the Regular Classroom: How to Reach and Teach All Learners, Grades 3-12, describes the methods and issues which schools must consider before implementing "cluster grouping" in the middle school milieu. While for many schools this topic can be a political and sociological "hot-button," Dr. Heacox has covered both praxis and theory in this well written and accessible article.

1. Define cluster.

Be clear about your definition of a "cluster". By definition, a cluster is a group of gifted and/or academically talented students who are placed within a group of grade-alike students. This "cluster" is then assigned to a teacher or team of teachers who are committed to differentiating instruction in order to meet their specialized learning needs. The purpose of cluster groups in classrooms is not just to put all "smart kids" together. Its purpose is to provide intellectual peers within a classroom where the teacher understands and supports gifted learners as well as is willing to differentiate the curriculum as appropriate to the needs of all students in his/her classroom.

2. Determine which students are to be designated as "cluster" students.

Schools need to decide who specifically will comprise the cluster.

Some schools view assignment of gifted students to a cluster as a component of more comprehensive academic programs for them. Therefore, cluster equals gifted. Other schools focus on specific academic abilities to identify the cluster. Therefore, you may have a language arts cluster, math cluster and so forth. Then again, schools may view clusters as the "next in line" students, those academically talented but not necessarily gifted, combined with the students identified as gifted. Done in this manner, the cluster is gifted and academically talented students.

3. Identify other students to be included in sections with the cluster group.

Two formats for class composition are most frequently observed. Schools may decide that the cluster should be placed within a mainstreamed group of students. In this format, the classroom reflects a range of learners from special education to gifted education.

Other schools have followed the format presented by Marcia Gentry (1999) that combined gifted students with average and low ability learners. In the Gentry model, no special education students or high average students are included in the cluster section. High average students are assigned to other sections to "balance" the academic range of learners. Gentry's model also places special needs students in a "cluster". These sections then receive high levels of special education support from special education teachers, para-professionals or aides.

How you compose the class list of cluster sections may come down to what will "politically float" in your middle school. However, a consistent practice must be followed.

4. Determine where the cluster will be placed in a middle school that uses teams.

One of the challenges in middle schools with teams becomes whether an "A" team and a "B" team image emerges if the cluster is assigned to only one team. The

size of the school, the number of teams, and the number of students being clustered are all factors in how you will address the placement of clusters within teams.

If you are a large school with a high number of students to be clustered, you may wish to set up a formula for the size and number of clusters. For example, you may decide that once a cluster reaches 12, it could be assigned to two teams. Each team, then, has a cluster of six rather than one team having all twelve.

5. Determine whether the cluster moves together from subject to subject or whether the cluster is flexibly scheduled.

If your school offers honors, enriched or accelerated courses, you will need to decide whether the cluster will always move together through its daily courses or move flexibly to courses most appropriate for their specific academic talents. For example, flexible instructional grouping would suggest that cluster students as well as all other students are "matched" to the courses most appropriate to their needs.

6. Write a job description for cluster teachers.

In order for teachers, parents, and administrators to clearly understand the roles and responsibilities of cluster teachers it is important that a job description is written. This job description should outline the professional responsibilities of the teacher to all students in the section, including the cluster students. It is most likely that teachers will both understand the demands of cluster groupings as well as better meet the learning needs of all students in their classroom if their responsibilities as cluster teachers are clearly defined.

7. Identify specific frameworks and strategies for differentiating content, processes, and products to respond to the specialized needs of the gifted.

General differentiation is not enough. Cluster teachers must provide differentiated content, processes, and products matched to the specialized learning needs of the gifted. If there is not thoughtful, well-planned, and specific differentiation for the gifted, it is not a cluster program. In addition, the achievement benefit of clustering for ALL students rests on the degree to which their learning experiences are differentiated. (Gentry, 1999)

8. Provide specialized training for the cluster teachers.

Teachers who are assigned the cluster of students need professional development opportunities that include information about both the cognitive and affective characteristics of gifted and talented students as well their specific learning differences. Teachers must also engage in in-depth training on differentiated instruction and strategies specific to differentiating the content, processes and products for the gifted. Information also needs to be provided about the purpose for and management of cluster sections

9. Determine whether clustering will be made "public".

There needs to be some discussion about the degree to which your cluster program is to be made public. Parents of gifted students need to know that clustering is at least one of the components of gifted education services that responds to their students needs for differentiation of the regular curriculum and their need for intellectual peers. However, some schools are hesitant to "go public" with the practice because of concerns that other parents will either demand placement in a cluster team or that the public concludes that one class section or team is "better than" the others.

10. Promote collaboration to support the cluster program.

Gentry (1999) identifies five necessary elements for success of cluster programs. She notes strong administrative support and leadership as a critical factor. It is important that school administrators not only understand the definition and purpose of clustering but also support the work of the teachers involved in the program component.

She notes that professional development is essential. Professional development related to clustering needs to be provided for all teachers in the middle school. All teachers need to know the who, what, and why of clustering in order to understand and support the program.

Gentry concludes that belief in colleagues and a belief in the benefits of clustering for ALL students are also necessary elements for success. Clustering is a program that affects all teachers and sections of students in the middle school. Belief in each other's work and in the program's purposes is foundational to not only the acceptance of the program but also its success.

The final element for success suggested by Gentry is collaboration. Collaboration can be defined as working together, planning together, as well as problem solving together. Collaboration in a cluster program needs to be broad based. Collaborative work should include all teachers within the grade level or team as well as collaboration with other cluster teachers, education specialists and administrative leadership.

References

Gentry, M. (1999). *Promoting Student Achievement and Exemplary Classroom Practices Through Cluster Grouping: A Research Based Alternative to Heterogeneous Grouping*. Research Monograph 99138. Connecticut: National Research Center for Gifted and Talented.



DID YOU SEE IT?

In the November 2005 issue of Middle School Journal, there was an article entitled *Understanding Chris to Teach Him More Effectively*. Author Lynne Bailey describes how she, as a middle school English teacher, came to understand and work with Chris, a highly gifted boy in her class. It's exciting to see MSJ profiling a teacher's work with a gifted student in an advanced class. Sharing this article in our schools might help other classroom teachers and might help principals see why gifted programming is necessary.

RESEARCH SYNTHESIS ON GIFTED PROVISIONS

A Summary of Dr. Karen Rogers' work...

For those of us who appreciate research based conclusions rather than anecdotal speculation, clichés, or conclusions based on what may or may not be “common sense,” Dr. Karen Rogers’ paper, titled, “Research Synthesis on Gifted Provisions” (1999) should be of great interest for those of us who are more “left-brained.” In her article, Dr. Rogers provides us with a detailed reiteration/synthesis of studies that statistically measure the efficacy of educational strategies that appear to have significant benefit to gifted students. Additionally, she includes researched responses/preferences, given by gifted students, in response to these educational strategies.

Rogers presents a concise list of “Instructional Management Services,” and “Instructional Delivery Services,” (provided to gifted students) that include “...quantified measures of the effect of the provision when these effects are statistically significant.” The effect of these services is measured by comparing gifted students receiving a particular modification, “...to gifted peers in the regular classroom.”

For example, research shows that when gifted students are placed in multi-grade classrooms, the benefit, or “effect size” is .19. This means that gifted students gain almost a 20% benefit (gaining just under one-fifth of a year’s learning) by being placed in multi-grade classrooms. Whereas, mentoring or one-to-one tutoring of gifted students has a .57 effect size - these services will gain over ½ year’s

learning compared to gifted students in a regular classroom. Effectively, mentoring or tutoring will allow these students to gain 3 years learning in 2.

Rogers’ paper includes effect scores for 24 educational strategies - from cluster grouping (ES = .62), to grade skipping (ES = .49). Additionally, some of the scores break down a particular strategy based on value for math and science versus reading and social studies, i.e., *Compacting* - ES for math and science = .83; *Compacting* - ES for reading and social studies = .26.

The second half of Roger’ paper reiterates a great deal of information about the learning styles and teaching methods that gifted children prefer. It relates tendencies and preferences, as well as methods that may not be effective.

Rogers’ paper lends great quantitative insight and support to those already using these strategies, while lending substantial verifiable “weight” to those who are still trying to promote these strategies in places where they aren’t currently practiced. The paper contains a wealth of information, both in its depth and breadth. This editor unflinchingly recommends this article for any teacher who may be teaching gifted students.

You can find Dr. Rogers’ article at:

http://www.austega.com/gifted/articles/Rogers_researchsynthesis.htm

NEW MATERIALS/RESOURCES

Cluster Materials/Lessons

From Brenda McGee: “I resisted answering your last request, but I can’t pass this one up [Middle Matters request for cluster grouping ideas]. I am a former teacher and taught a gifted cluster. I had so much success with the modifications I made to the district curriculum that a colleague and I wrote these ideas down and eventually created curriculum guides. We have not published these guides and they are being used all over the country and continue to get great response from teachers. They are science and social studies driven, but are fully integrated with the four core areas. They are also based on universal concepts such as Ages, Powers, Connections, Images and Conflicts... and based on National Standards for middle grades. I hesitated to answer because I didn’t want to sound like an advertisement...”

There are two middle school lessons (activities) that are free on the website to download—the lessons are from Powers and Conflicts. To download these lessons and check out other materials available go to:

<http://www.mcgee-keiser.com>

(*There are some very interesting materials and ideas there—Jan Hersh, Editor*)

INNOVATION LOST?

Brian Mays, Gifted Intervention Specialist,
Northmont Middle School, Ohio

Someone from the United States once said, "I'd rather be a "C" student in Poughkeepsie than an "A" student in Shanghai. According to Thomas Friedman, a Pulitzer Prize winning NY Times editorial columnist, this not-so-prescient statement may no longer be true. In fact, just the opposite may now be a reality.

I watched Mr. Friedman make this statement on one of PBS's Sunday morning news shows called, "Foreign Exchange," hosted by Fareed Zakaria, editor of *Newsweek International*. During this program, Friedman, who is considered a brilliant observer of Asian political and economic trends, made it clear that both China and India have been quietly growing their economies to the point that they may rival the United States and Western Europe in less than 5 years. He stated that during a conversation he had with Chinese business and political leaders this past year; he asked them, "Where do you see yourselves in 2 to 3 years?" The reply was, "Where you (the United States) are next year." In other words, this response implied the already-known fact that China and India have repeatedly taken our innovations, mainly in information technology, and used it, copied it, changed it slightly, to manufacture affordable products on the world market.

On the surface, it may seem that the incredible growth in these countries would have been instigated by huge multi-national organizations or the low-wage Asian workforce. But according to Friedman, it is due to innovative individuals using information technology - the Internet, vis-à-vis

computers, to learn about and produce complex Western scale manufacturing strategies and product lines.

Friedman was not shy about sharing his predictions. He stated, with an ironic chuckle, that unless the American education system doesn't continue to produce more Steve Jobs' and "Googlemeisters," America will lose the innovation edge - very soon. His optimism about American innovation has always been at the forefront of his opinions, but he is currently worried that the future of American innovation is in trouble unless we make a concerted effort to emphasize or re-emphasize ingenuity, inventiveness, and the spirit of innovation/problem solving.

Friedman's concern is also shared by another thoughtful American and it lands four-square in the lap of the U. S. education system. Bill Gates states, "When I compare our high schools to what I see when I'm traveling abroad, I am terrified for our work force of tomorrow. In math and science, our fourth graders are among the top students in the world. By eighth grade, they're in the middle of the pack. By 12th grade, U.S. students are scoring near the bottom of all industrialized nations..." Teachers, we must ask ourselves why this trend is occurring. What does it mean? What can we do?

Our rallying cry should be *innovation!* As we begin (or begin again) to cluster students by interest or ability we should always be taking the next step, or

include the step of taking what has been learned, then spinning something new from it. We should always be on the lookout for problems and asking our gifted students - and every student, "How might we solve this?"

In cluster groups, the process of innovation could take the form of grouping students with similar interests or abilities, then asking questions of at varying levels of difficulty, depending on the groups. Depending on the questions, this way of "leveling" may not be as transparent to students as it first may seem. Yet you will be asking students to create, to conspire, to collaborate, and find solutions.

Our gifted students have an *innate* ability to ask and answer complex questions. In fact, all children have this innate capacity to one degree or another. So why not separate our students into "Innovation Cluster Groups," where the central task is to solve a particular problem in creative ways. Reward students for their multiplicity of answers, for their creativity and usefulness, for the practicality of their ideas. What better way to inspire innovation than to continually pose problems and require solutions?

It may not be necessary for America to be "Number One" in every endeavor. In fact, there is a certain hubris in this #1 mentality that may contribute to our current economic lull. Yet, innovation will most probably be our ticket to survival in this new world where only the strongest problem solvers survive.

Latest News From The Davidson Academy

The Davidson Academy of Nevada - New Kind of Public School for Profoundly Gifted Students to Open at University of Nevada, Reno Next Year

A new kind of public school for profoundly gifted students, called The Davidson Academy of Nevada, is set to open in the fall of 2006 thanks to administrators at the University of Nevada, Reno (UNR), the Nevada State Department of Education and the Davidson Institute for Talent Development. The Davidson Academy of Nevada will be located on the UNR campus as a non-residential school for profoundly gifted middle and high school students, who have met all the necessary application requirements. "We are launching The Davidson Academy of Nevada to provide an opportunity for our nation's brightest students to learn at a pace and depth commensurate with their abilities and allow them to soar. This will not only help the students, but our nation as a whole," said Jan Davidson, co-founder of the Davidson Institute and The Davidson Academy.

Academy students will be able to accelerate through the required middle and high school curriculum at a pace appropriate to their abilities and motivation until they become fully matriculated into the University system through accelerated course options. Many of them will then proceed through undergraduate and graduate level coursework as they meet the prerequisites to do so.

For more information or to download an application, please visit www.DavidsonAcademy.UNR.edu <http://www.davidsonacademy.unr.edu/>.

2006 THINK Summer Institute Application Available

The Davidson Institute is seeking profoundly gifted students, ages 12 through 15, who are interested in attending the 2006 THINK Summer Institute, a three-week residential summer program on the campus of the University of Nevada, Reno where students can earn up to seven college credits. The 2006 THINK Summer Institute runs from July 8 through July 29. Tuition is \$1,800 and covers course credits, room and board and the cost of planned programs and activities. Financial assistance is available based on need.

To qualify, students must be 12-15 years old during THINK and a U.S. citizen residing in the United States or a permanent U.S. resident. Applicants must also meet or exceed designated SAT or ACT scores, and submit a \$50 non-refundable application fee. The deadline for applications is April 3, 2006. To download an application, please visit www.THINKSummerInstitute.org <http://www.thinksummerinstitute.org/>.

2006 Davidson Fellows Scholarship Applications Available

The Davidson Institute for Talent Development is offering high achieving young people across the country the opportunity to be named as 2006 Davidson Fellows, an honor accompanied by a \$50,000, \$25,000 or \$10,000 scholarship in recognition of a significant piece of work in Science, Technology, Mathematics, Music, Literature, Philosophy or Outside the Box.

To be eligible, applicants must be under the age of 18 as of Oct. 1, 2006, and a U.S. citizen residing in the United States or a permanent U.S. resident. There is no minimum age for eligibility. The deadline to apply is March 31, 2006. Applicants must submit an original piece of work recognized by experts in the field as "significant" and it must have the potential to make a positive contribution to society.

The scholarship must be used at an accredited institute of learning. For more information on the Davidson Fellows, or to download an application, please visit www.DavidsonFellows.org <http://www.davidsonfellows.org/>

NEW CLUSTER GROUPING

by Lucy Le May, District112, MN lemayl@district112.org

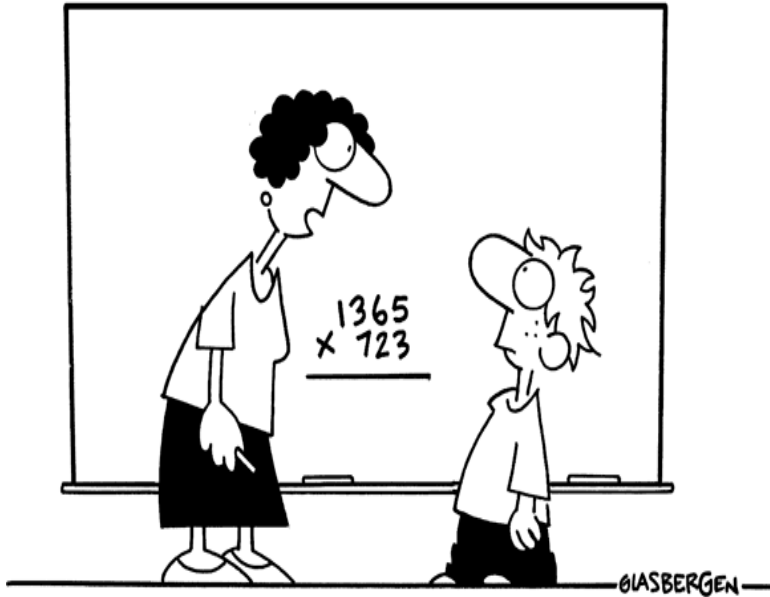
I am responsible for grades 6, 7 & 8, and would like to share my experience with a new modification in our school - cluster grouping.

Middle level administrators had been very wary of clusters until we started to use the NWEA tests every spring to look for high math and high reading kids. These test scores were used to predict who would pass our state competency tests. Kids who reached the G/T benchmarks on NWEA were clustered together for Language Arts and Reading. Class size was increased to 30 students by adding those who had high verbal ability and a recommendation by the previous year's teacher (based on a checklist of five criteria. Additionally, this did not skim off all high readers from the other non-cluster Language Arts classes. Since our math classes are already homogeneously grouped, we didn't need to cluster these high math students.

In the Language Arts clusters, I team teach in the whole class and help write curriculum. So a teacher may have one cluster and 3 non-cluster Language Arts/Reading classes in his/her day. For the teams who split Reading and Language Arts between two teachers, they flip flop the cluster: one gets them for reading and one gets them for Language Arts. This year I made a concerted effort to keep all the profoundly gifted kids together in one family (6 kids), thus creating a cluster within a cluster. They have the most extreme needs and receive more parent contact than most. This is easier to do with one teacher/family per grade.

Finally, I schedule the clusters across grades at different periods so that I can usually be in a different cluster at any period of the day.

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"Pretend you're starring in a reality show about a kid who can make his dreams come true if he works hard and gets good grades."

**CHECK
IT OUT!**

Art Snyder has created this list of internet resources for gifted children through the Ohio Association for Gifted Children. His concise database of about 200 leading Internet resources—alphabetized and grouped, for easy navigation (including portals; math/science/technology/testing, publishers, and many others) — is again available.

Look for Art Snyder's Gifted Education Internet Resources:

<http://www.oagc.com/Resources/links.php>

The National Association of Student Councils has posted a complete list of programs to enable greater student participation in schools and the community. Check out this awesome list at:

http://www.nasc.us/s_nasc/sec.asp?CID=258&DID=28627

This is an interesting resource for all of us, with articles by teachers, former students, and parents! Check out the website at

<http://www.giftededpress.com/>

Leave No Gifted Child Behind

An interesting and timely article from the Washington Post on Tuesday, December 27, 2005.

http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2005/12/26/AR2005122600553.html?nav=rss_opinion/columns



BOOK REVIEW

"Educating Gifted Students in Middle School"



It flew off the shelves at NAGC, and appears to be flying off the shelves of Amazon.com -

Susan Rakow's new book -

Educating Gifted Students in Middle School.

After reading it, I can see why!

This book is, as the back cover blurb indicates, truly a 'focus on creative, practical, and realistic school solutions...'. I especially enjoyed each of the chapters starting off with one or more Essential Questions, which the author answers in detail throughout the chapter, making it a highly practical book for teachers. At the end of each chapter, Susan provides conclusions and then adds some "Next Steps...Taking Action" tips that help consolidate and summarize the key points of the chapter. Because of the format of the book, it is the type of book that you can pick up, find a chapter or chapters that are relevant to a particular issue, and use it as a reference book for further information on that issue.

One of my favorite chapters in the book, Ch. 4, The Role of the Gifted Teacher, has a wonderful table that compares Qualities of Successful Middle School Teachers and Successful Teachers of the Gifted with respect to both Professional and Political Attributes. The table helped me recognize some things that I do well, and those areas in which I might benefit from a change.

The Curricular and Instructional Strategies chapter provided a concise summary of many of the strategies that I studied when acquiring my gifted endorsement, some of which have since been updated and modified. The chapter on Special Populations was quite diverse in touching on many different segments of gifted populations. In the Books, Reading and Middle School Students chapter, Susan highlights the importance of reading across the curriculum, and includes an excellent project idea, as well as a wide variety of titles of books that gifted Middle School students may enjoy.

I'm just glad I bought my copy before the conference, so I was able to have it signed by the author! If you haven't gotten yours yet, you can find it at the publisher's website (Prufrock Press Inc. www.prufrock.com) or online through Amazon.com. If you're reading this issue of Middle Matters, you need to read Susan's book!

Book Review written by Jan Hersh

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MISSION STATEMENT

The Middle Grades Division recognizes the unique needs of gifted middle grades learners and educators. Middle school is the level at which gifted students face great challenges to full development of their potential and is a time when a large number of gifted students, particularly girls and minority students, begin to underachieve in response to perceived societal and peer pressures. The division recognizes the need to develop appropriate strategies for working with these students. To address these concerns, the division works in the areas of curriculum, instruction, research, and communication and dissemination, to assist students, teachers, and administrators as they endeavor to make the middle school years a positive and challenging experience for gifted students.

For more information, visit the NAGC
website:

www.nagc.org

