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ABSTRACT

Described is the confluent instructional approach by which students in learning disabled and gifted classes participated in combined ecology studies. It is explained that teachers determined areas of study for each group, the needs of the students, and scheduling matters. In addition to content learning, students are said to have improved peer relationships and self-concepts. Six steps in such joint efforts are outlined. (CL)

HOW CIA (confluent instructional approach) CAN HELP DESEGREGATE GIFTED/TALENTED CLASSROOMS

Miriam Thornton

Everyone of us is victimized by labels. The labels lead to stereotypes. We see a Black principal (Black is the label) and we then expect to hear her use Black English (the stereotype). We see a dark-skinned teacher from Arizona (Arizona is the label) and assume he's a Native American (Native American is the stereotype). We watch a truck driver (truck driver is the label) climb off his rig and take off his cap only to discover we've been observing a woman. (The woman shattered the stereotype.) In education we victimize and are victimized by labels.

In particular, programs for exceptional students label children. Out of a sincere intent to meet the educational needs of groups of children with special needs, we label. We have programs for the blind, the retarded, the deaf, the multiply handicapped, the emotionally disturbed; the learning disabled, and the gifted.

To each of these labels we unwittingly attach stereotypes-generalizations or myths. The blind child is often believed to be quite bright. The retarded child is assumed to be blissful. The gifted child is considered a snob or an egg-head.

The stereotypes or myths lead to real and perceived isolation. A gifted child who is viewed with suspicion because of his misunderstood talents may be isolated emotionally from his peers, his parents, and his teachers. Special education labels lead to academic as well as social isolation or segregation. As special education professionals we seek out

children according to their uniqueness; their unusualness, their difference. To meet the child's special needs, we isolate him in a special academic program. Because the exceptional student is isolated academically by program, he becomes isolated socially by association with the program.

Special education programs for gifted children are developed to help ignite their creative, academic, and social potentials. Whether the program structure is a self-contained class, a resource room, or an itinerant format, the children are confronted with their "giftedness" in that educational setting and are faced with their "humanness" when they leave. Thus, the students, as well as the teachers, become isolated from their peers, by the label. There grows a social isolation which breeds elitism and misunderstanding. The students are children totally, gifted in part. As educators we have been dealing with only a part, failing to realize that perhaps our role must also include helping the student to deal constructively with his childness.

To develop an educational program which emphasizes only the differentness of a child's attributes is as one-sided as an educational program which emphasizes cognitive development to the exclusion of affective growth.

Why do we have labels? Because as specialized educators we must meet the special academic needs of the students. The special needs fall into clusters. And the children with a given cluster of needs become labelled. As long as we have special education, we will have labelling. There is nothing

bad about labelling. It is simply the assigning of a name. It is the interpretation, the generalization, the stereotype, about the labels that becomes dangerous.

So-who does the stereotyping? Teachers, students, and parents. Does the labelling cause isolation or segregation? Yes. To the extent that programs for the gifted meet the special needs of the gifted and contain gifted students, there is a separation from the mainstream of American students, both academically and socially. Such separation, such segregation, is not necessarily bad. Does stereotyping cause separation? Yes-both academic and social separation.

Special educational programming does not need to isolate students. It is possible to de-segregate most special education programs, no matter the exceptionality, while keeping the original program goals intact. We need only to expand our goals beyond the confines of the uniqueness of any given exceptionality. We must meet the special academic needs of the exceptional child as well as his exceptional needs as a social child. More simply, we must teach to the universality and not just to the exceptionality.

Children are unique-perhaps with a uniqueness requiring differential educational programming. But across the uniqueness, across the exceptionality, cuts a common denominator, a universal-the striving of one human being to communicate and interact with another, regardless of any educationally defined attribute. This universal striving to communicate is the component we have omitted from our

curriculum guides. The omission is understandable.

In our teacher training programs we learn, for example, the characteristics of the gifted child, how to identify the gifted child, how to use various teaching strategies and materials with the gifted child, how to counsel the parents of the gifted child. If we are fortunate, we do some student teaching with regular students as well as with gifted children. But what college courses teach us how to relate the two groups of students to eachother-the gifted and the regular. Our teacher training is compartmentalized. When we become teachers, we do the compartmentalizing. We forget that, no matter the special label, we are dealing with children, children who have a universal striving to communicate. Yet where in all our curricula do we provide for supervised, structured, solidly content-based interaction of gifted students with other exceptionalities and with regular class students. Where do we use a confluent instructional approach?

In humanistic education handbooks, confluent education refers to the skillful blending of cognitive and affective activities in educational programming. Confluent means blending. The confluent instructional model refers to the blending of the exceptionalities. Instructional refers to the method, the strategy used in providing any given content. Therefore, the confluent instructional appraoch provides for the blending of any given speical education exceptionality for specific learning experiences with the purpose of providing for the acquisition of selected skills and knowledge

and for structered, social interaction.

Any program for a given exceptionality must adhere to the educational strategies appropriate for that exceptionality, The the confluent instructional model can be implemented as part of the programming, for selected study units.

The confluent instructional approach emerged when the teacher of a gifted class and the teacher of an LD class noticed that both groups of students were involved in playground conflict amongst themselves and regular class students. The two teachers involved decided to concentrate upon frou areas: reducing playground conflict, uniting two oppressed exceptionalities, developing positive playground behaviors, and developing non-competitive classroom group activities where student interaction could be observed and structured, perhaps carrying over into playground interaction.

At this time during the school year, the gifted class was involved with a study unit on woodlot ecology. The school was fortunate to have twenty wooded acres adjacent to the playground. The LD teacher realized that though her students would enjoy building terrariums that they could not manage the ecology unit in its entirety. It did appear that the study unit held possibilities as a workable, initial topic through which the teachers could combine the classes in an attempt to provide a supervised, structured social interaction.

Before the teachers could begin offering a confluent instructional unit, they needed to become familiar with

critical aspects of the other's class. The teachers shared information related to the following three areas: characteristics of their distinct exceptionalities, rationale for both programs, and distinct instructional strategies implemented for the two exceptionalities. From these discussions, the teachers evolved a format for planning the confluent instructional unit.

Four areas would be considered in developing any confluent instructional unit: program goals, topic, instructional needs, and social-peer needs. Each of the four areas would be examined for aspects distinct for gifted, distinct, in this case, for LD, and confluent aspects.

In this ecology unit, among the areas to be studied by the LD students were: 1. understanding/explaining the function of 3 soil types; 2. understanding/explaining the purpose of the container; 3. locating/selecting plants.

The gifted students' concentration would include areas of: 1. soils studies; 2. experimental environments; 3. plant classification.

The teachers determined that several areas of study were necessary for both groups of students. These areas included: 1. sequence of steps to constructing a terrarium; 2. interdependence of soil and water and plants; 3. identification

Next, the teachers evaluated their separate instructional strategies-the needs of their students. LD children need repetition, a variety of audio-visual aids, and relatively narrow areas of questioning, to name only a few needs.

The gifted class required differing specified strategies including: 1. opportunity for independent research; 2. opportunity to interact with community resource persons; 3. discussions with braod questioning emphasizing hypothesizing, infering, reconstructing, and evaluating.

In determining the specified instructional strategies, common methods and needs became apparent. Both groups needed field trips, hands-on activities, and discussions which would emphasize a middle range of questioning.

The teachers had identified differentiated and common program goals, distinct and common content, and specified and common student instructional needs. They next needed to tackle scheduling, available space, and student attitudes.

In operation the confluent instructional unit interwove large group instruction, demonstrations, and projects with separate class activities designed to meet the distinct program goals, content, instructional and peer needs of the two exceptionalities.

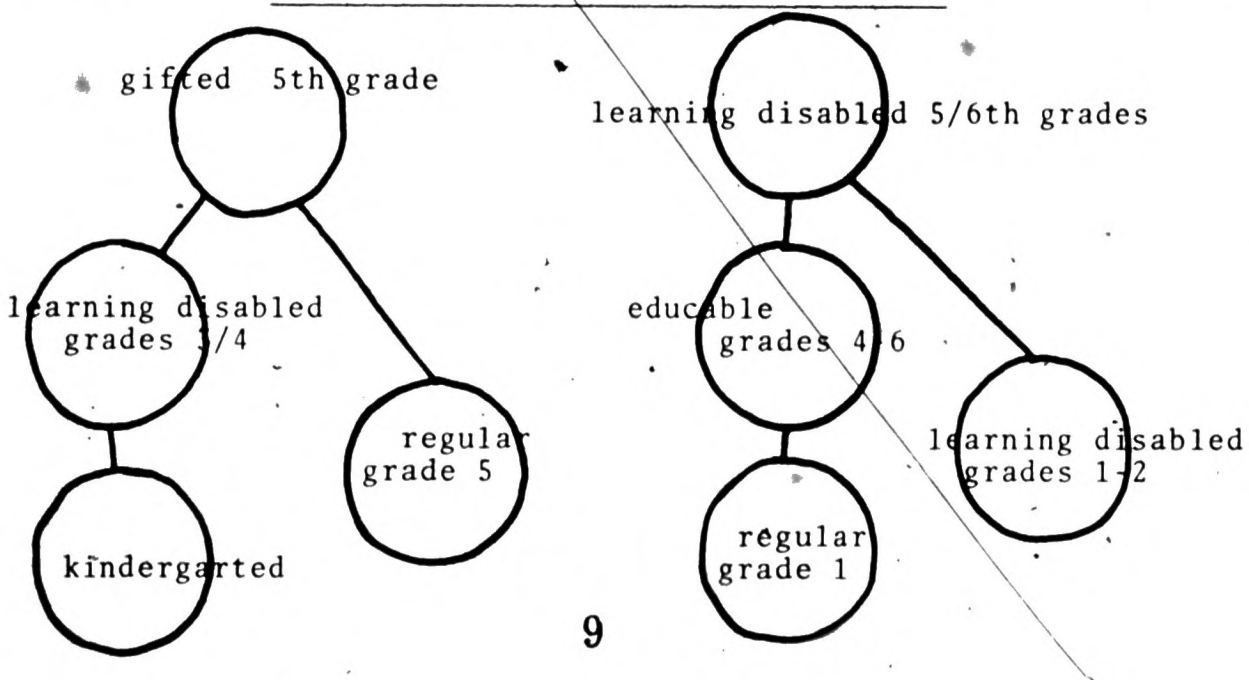
The unexpected outcomes fell into three major areas: peer relationships, self-concept, and teacher interrelationships. The students formed alliances, realizing that, no matter the label, other children had worthwhile skills and abilities. The students learned to accept eachother's differences and to be patient with eachother. Their self-concepts were enhanced. Terrariums built by the LD students were indistinguishable from those built by the gifted class. The gifted students were not mere tutors; they were equal participants in a non-competitive activity. They were not

being exploited for their skills, knowledge and general intelligence. The LD students knew they could not be "retarded". After all, weren't they doing the same project the gifted students were.

The teachers also benefited. Each teacher gained more knowledge and experience in working with other groups of special students. The team teaching was beneficial to the students and the teachers. Other teachers noticed the project and asked if the gifted class could assist in projects with their classes. Other teachers became aware that these special ed teachers were neither weird or snobby and sought out suggestions and advice about various activities. The LD teacher became aware of an LD/gifted student in her class; the gifted teacher obtained materials and developed instructional strategies to implement with a few gifted students with learning difficulties.

The implementation of this one confluent instructional study unit-terrarium construction- extended into six other classes.

EXPANSION OF SKILLS THROUGH C I A



DO IT YOURSELF CIA

EXAMINATION:

1. examine program goals (gifted-other)
2. examine curricula (gifted-other)
3. examine instructional needs (gifted-other)
4. examine social-peer needs (gifted-other)

DETERMINATION:

1. determine confluent goals
2. determine confluent content
3. determine confluent instructional strategies
4. determine confluent social-peer needs

SELECTION:

1. select/specify confluent goals
2. select/specify confluent content
3. select/specify confluent instructional needs
4. select/specify confluent social-peer needs

PREPARATION:

1. prepare confluent content/materials
2. prepare specified instructional strategies
3. prepare students for interaction

TEACHING:

RECORDING:

1. academic-skills, knowledge, application
2. social-student peer relationships, teaching staff relationships, interrelationships of students?teachers to all other students/teachers

The confluent instructional approach model was developed by two classroom teachers and has accommodated a wide variety of topics. Further detailed information may be obtained from Miriam Thornton, 1836 Maple Avenue, Yuma, Arizona, 85364.