

Services Available from American Mensa for Students Who are Gifted and Talented: An Overview for Teachers and Administrators

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Abstract

Mensa is an organization of people scoring in the upper two percent on an approved intelligence test. Once considered a group for “geeks”, it has expanded its role to offer considerable resources to parents and teachers of the gifted. However, a review of the literature indicated that this information is not routinely available to non-members. Through an extensive review of the Mensa website, this article provided information on the organization, as well as its educational resources that are available to teachers who enhance the education of gifted students. Additionally, suggestions for their use in acceleration, enrichment, diversifying instruction, curriculum and planning and preparation were included.

Introduction

Mensa was founded in England in 1946 as a society for “bright people”. Designed to be free of political, racial or religious distinctions, the organization’s initial purposes were for fellowship and participation in social/cultural activities. Perhaps because of this, the general public has developed somewhat of a distorted understanding of Mensa, often viewing it as a club for “geeks” or “nerds” (Whitby, 1999; Lyall, 1996).

Since its inception, however, Mensa has changed its purpose and expanded its services. In the United States, for example, it has become a provider of considerable resources to parents and teachers of the gifted and talented (MGT). Regrettably, there is limited information published in professional journals to inform American educators of these resources. To illustrate this point, an ERIC search was conducted in the fall of 2014 using the descriptors “Mensa”, “Mensa Services”, “Mensa Resources”, and “Mensa and Teachers of the Gifted”, and located a total of 27 articles published between 1971 through 2014. The majority of these articles were published in the *MENSA Research Journal*, a magazine available to Mensa members, about topics such as Intelligence Quotient (IQ), measuring creativity, cultural diversity, gifted teens and talent development. Only one article, “What On Earth is Mensa?”, (1971), outlined specifics about Mensa itself. In a “Q & A” format, officers answered questions about issues such as the number of members, IQ scores required for admission, and the idea that Mensa portrays an “artificial elitist quality” (p. 481).

A second search conducted in public media websites during the same time frame, determined that much of the information consisted of announcements of local Mensa events. Seemingly, then, there is little information about the resources provided by an organization with an avowed interest in giftedness available to anyone other than its own members.

Purpose

This article was written to inform teachers and administrators, who may not be members of the organization, about American Mensa, the resources it provides, and how they may be used by teachers in the public schools to benefit gifted students. In addition, it is hoped that any teacher who is interested in expanding the content of their lessons, and/or diversifying the manner of their instruction, might find the article to be beneficial.

Mensa: The Organization

According to the Mensa International website (www.mensa.org), 2013, the organization has three goals: 1) to identify and foster human intelligence for the benefit of humanity; 2) to encourage research in the nature, characteristics and uses of intelligence; and 3) to promote stimulating intellectual and social opportunities for its members. There are approximately 100,000 Mensans in 100 countries, with "...active Mensa organizations in over 40 countries on every continent except Antarctica" (About Mensa International, 2013, www.mensa.org).

American Mensa Ltd. is the name for the Mensa branch in the United States (www.us.mensa.org). Headquartered in Arlington, Texas, it claims to have more than 57,000 members nationwide. Though the organization is adamant that it takes no stand on politics, religion or social issues, American Mensa has an interest in gifted students that goes back many years.

Membership in the organization is open to persons who have scored within the upper two percent on an approved intelligence test that has been properly administered and supervised. American Mensa accepts the results of approximately 200 standardized intelligence tests that include the Stanford-Binet, Wechsler Adult Intelligence Scale (WAIS), Wechsler Intelligence Scale for Children (WISC), Wechsler Preschool and Primary Scale of Intelligence (WPPSI), GRE General Test (GRE), Miller Analogies Test (MAT), Armed Forces Qualification Test (AFQT), and Army or Navy General Competency Test (GCT). A partial list of commonly administered and acceptable tests can be found at (www.us.mensa.org/join/testscores/qualifying). Previous test scores are evaluated individually at a one-time cost of \$40.

In lieu of submitting previous test scores (and also for \$40), individuals can take the Mensa Admission Test. Once accepted for membership, dues for American Mensa are \$70 per year.

American Mensa Resources for Teachers of the Gifted

Mensa has been described as a society primarily for adults. However, there are a number of resources that are specifically designed for gifted students, or teachers of these students. It should be emphasized that all are funded by the American Mensa Education and Research Foundation and are available "...as a complimentary service to the public" (www.mensafoundation.org). In other words, one does not have to be a Mensa member to use them. Moreover, the Foundation indicated that reproduction and distribution of these materials without modification is allowed. These resources include *Excellence in Reading*, *Pinterest Boards*, the *Year of Living Poetically Program*, *TED Connections*, and *Lesson Plans*. All can be accessed in the Teacher/Parents Resources section on the Mensa For Kids website (www.mensaforkids.com), and are discussed in greater detail in the following paragraphs.

Excellence in Reading Program

Viewed by Mensa as its flagship resource for teachers, the *Excellence in Reading Program* was designed to instill an appreciation of classic literature and is based on the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) Summertime Reading list. The books that are included are "segmented" according to grade levels (K-12). Students who complete a segment are eligible to receive a certificate and a Mensa for Kids T-shirt. Involving fiction, drama, poetry, non-fiction, autobiography, government, mythology, religion, and philosophy, a list of NEH books is also available at: (www.slideshare.net/MensaFoundation/excellence-in-reading).

Pinterest Boards

Pinterest is a social media site and an on-line tool for collecting items of interest and sharing them with others (www.pinterest.com). *Pinterest* is comprised of boards that are organized by topic and supplemented with materials and references. On its Mensa for Kids website, Mensa has collected

and made available 31 different pin boards that address educationally-relevant topics such as Shakespeare for Kids and Music Class Magic.

The Year of Living Poetically Program

The *Year of Living Poetically Program* presents the world's greatest poems to students, as well as techniques to help students memorize many of these immortal lines.

TED Connections

TED Connections are short, easy-to-use guides for teachers, parents and students and are extensions of the basic TED Talks. For those who may be unfamiliar, TED is a non-profit organization unaffiliated with Mensa that stands for ***Technology, Entertainment, Design***. TED offers “free knowledge and inspiration from the world's most inspired thinkers” (www.TED.org). Its major events include two annual summer conferences, the award-winning TED Talks video site, the Open Translation Project, and TED Conversations.

Lesson Plans

Finally, *Lesson Plans* for gifted children are available from American Mensa for use in a traditional classroom or homeschool environment. According to Mensa, the lessons are correlated with the common curriculum at each grade level, can be used with very few supplies and can be implemented without prior knowledge or training. Routinely, new *Lesson Plans* are added each month, and teachers can write in and request that Mensa develop a Lesson Plan based on a given idea or topic. A complete listing of these *Lesson Plans*, as well as examples of their content, can be found on the Web, (www.mensafoundation.org).

Suggestions for the Use of Mensa Resources in the Classroom

Acceleration and enrichment are the program options for gifted instruction that are most frequently mentioned in the literature. Additionally, there are other components or considerations necessary for the effective education of gifted students, such as differentiation of instruction, curriculum development, teacher planning, and preparation. Suggestions for using Mensa resources in these areas are listed in the following paragraphs. Two advisory notes are in order, however. First, these suggestions are neither all-inclusive nor exclusive. In other words, the multiple ways in which they can be used are limited solely by the creativity of the teacher. Secondly, teachers should check with their Principal before implementing any of them to ensure that there is no conflict with school district policies.

Acceleration

Generally speaking, acceleration involves moving a student through a school district's curriculum at a more rapid pace. Though up to 18 different types of acceleration have been identified (Southern and Jones, 2004, pp. 5-6), those that seem to be the most enhanced through the use of Mensa's resources for grades K-12 are Curriculum Compacting, Independent Study, Self-Paced Instruction, Credit by Examination, and On-Line / Correspondence Courses.

Curriculum Compacting

For openers, teachers can use Mensa's *Lesson Plans* to reduce the amount of non-essential instruction and repetitive drill in their classes and open up other possibilities for their students. For example, some students might attend a specific class only for new material or for concepts that have not yet been mastered. The rest of the time could be used to acquire more in-depth instruction in the respective subject from TED Talks, Pinterest Boards, or other supplemental materials.

Independent Study

Mensa's *Pinterest Boards* offer excellent opportunities for independent study. The 679 “pins” available through this resource can assist students in identifying a topic for, or completing, such a project.

Self-Paced Instruction

As Mensa's *Lesson Plans* have been designed so that anyone can implement the instruction, students can use them to complete individual self-guided work at their own speed. This may be of particular benefit for students who are twice-exceptional (learning disabled and gifted).

Credit by Examination

The many resources available through Mensa can provide students with an advanced understanding of content in a variety of academic subjects. At the high school level, a district might allow a student to receive equivalent credit through successfully passing a comprehensive examination without being required to take the actual course.

On-Line / Correspondence Courses

This program is really more of an option for student members of Mensa rather than for teachers of the gifted. Based on proof of membership, the Johns Hopkins University Center for Talented Youth offers Young Mensans a 10 percent discount on their online courses. Similarly, (GiftedandTalented.com) offers innovative computer-based, multimedia courses in Mathematics, English Language Arts, Science, and Computer Programming. Should school policies allow for this option, gifted students who are Mensa members, might be allowed to complete an on-line course during school hours under teacher supervision. Or, the District might view this opportunity as an extension of its *Dual Enrolment* program should it have one.

Enrichment

Enrichment involves providing programs, activities, and/or experiences that are outside the regular, traditional school curriculum. Renzulli and Reis (1997, p.15) outlined three different types of enrichment activities: Type I – the use of a wide variety of disciplines, topics, occupations, and hobbies, not ordinarily covered in regular education; Type II – the development of higher-level thinking skills to include creativity, problem solving, as well as the use of advanced level reference materials; and Type III - the pursuit of a self-selected area for advanced content acquisition, such as the application of interests and / or the development of authentic products.

Type I Enrichment

The sheer multitude on Mensa resources for teachers that have been described previously should make it obvious that Mensa is a treasure-trove for *Type I enrichment*. Simply put, there are activities to interest every student.

Type II Enrichment

Regarding *Type II Enrichment*, teachers have used great works in literature to supplement readings in basal texts, as well as to form discussion groups to address higher levels of thinking (Halstead, 1990). *Excellence in Reading* as well as the *Year of Living Poetically Program* are two of Mensa's resources that could accomplish both of these tasks. Moreover, TED Talks are also excellent sources for *Type II Enrichment*. As an illustration, a session entitled *Shape Shifting Dinosaurs* provides students with the opportunity to: 1) view a discussion with a paleontologist (“*watch it*”); 2) read a book on dinosaurs (“*read about it*”); 3) visit a virtual museum on-line (“*surf it*”) and; 4) answer higher-level questions (“*think about it*”) all based on their level of understanding.

Type III Enrichment

With their utility for independent study, *Pinterest Boards* are excellent resources for *Type III Enrichment*. For example, the *Pin Board* “Mad Scientists” includes a high-interest, hands-on classroom activity involving Styrofoam and its impact on the environment. Such an activity can be a great way to introduce students to scientific field work, have them assume the role of an independent researcher, and complete a project designed to address a real-world problem.

Diversifying Instruction

Diversifying Instruction adjusts both teacher presentation and curriculum content to allow for maximum benefit for all students. Mensa's many resources offer numerous alternatives and choices for teachers. Additionally, these resources have been designed to allow teachers to vary the complexity, depth, and presentation of activities and assignments, and to address higher levels of thinking.

Curriculum

Mensa resources can enhance *Curriculum* in a number of different ways. Several of them are a "curriculum" in and of themselves, such as *Excellence in Reading* and the *Year of Living Poetically Program*. So are a number of *Pinterest Boards*. For example, complete courses in a number of Foreign Languages (Chinese, French, German, Spanish), as well as World Literature (South American Literature and Culture), are available through the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) Pin. *Pinterest Boards* can also supplement and add breadth to curriculum, and/or provide a means to integrate curriculum across a number of different subjects. Using the pin entitled "Science and Verse" as an illustration, teachers are shown how to combine science with English, the Arts, and physical education.

Preparation and Planning

Finally, teachers have access to a number of pre-prepared lesson plans through Mensa. This can be a big boon to teachers from both a time-saving standpoint and content standpoint. A comment from a teacher who has used them in the past may serve as the best indicator of their utility (<http://www.mensafoundation.org/who-we-impact>):

"...Each lesson is carefully crafted, putting into account the needs of a gifted learner, involving all the senses (visual links, hands-on activities and higher-level thinking for the curious and engaged mind)... The assessment at the end of each lesson helps clarify learning accomplished as well as provide documentation"...

Summary

Mensa is an organization of people scoring in the upper two percent on an approved intelligence test. Since 1946, it has expanded its goals to include: 1) identifying and fostering human intelligence for the benefit of humanity; 2) encouraging research in the nature, characteristics, and uses of intelligence; and 3) promoting stimulating intellectual and social opportunities for its members. Its U.S.A. Chapter, American Mensa, offers considerable resources to parents and teachers of the gifted and talented. This article provided information on resources that are available to teachers who enhance the education of gifted students, such as *Excellence in Reading*, the *Year of Living Poetically* and *Lesson Plans*. Additionally, suggestions for their use in *Acceleration*, *Enrichment*, *Diversifying Instruction*, *Curriculum*, *Preparation and Planning* were included.

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