

**The
Meeting
G/T
in
Inclusion**

Room

for

Students

an

Classroom

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Gifted and talented children have great potential at the primary level for self-direction and independent study in the regular classroom, and they can work effectively with children of low and average ability to make the regular classroom a place for creative and productive learning in the basic subject matters. We developed a system of individualized instruction for second grade (Feldhusen, 1993) that has been

applied in all the different elementary grades and found to be an effective system for actively involving the gifted and talented as a cluster and as individuals in the regular classroom. The children work at their own individual achievement levels in reading, writing, and mathematics. One major aspect of the system is the weekly classroom meeting in which all children participate, but the gifted and talented are expected to take a leadership role.

Children often take a completely passive view toward classroom operations and assume that the teacher has total control and decides all that goes on in the classroom. Instead, we wanted to teach children that they should assume some responsibility for what goes on in the classroom and for the development of new ideas to enhance classroom operations and activities. However, the gifted and talented, according to Coleman and Cross (2000), have great potential to be actively involved in and responsible for classroom operations.

We developed a plan for classroom organization for grades 1–6 and implemented individualized instruction, with the children writing daily learning agreements concerning the topics, order, and time they would devote to the different areas of the curriculum. Individual learning centers were set up in the basic curricular areas. There was a reading corner and library with small rockers, an area where the children were seated and working in small groups of three or four, and an area where the gifted and tal-

ented were clustered to work together some of the time (but also mixed much of the time). The gifted children were never labeled as such, but were identified by intelligence tests with quotients above 135 and achievement test scores in math and reading above the 95th percentile, which followed identification guidelines for Indiana (Adams-Byers, 1998).

In this article, we will discuss the method of classroom meetings that were used to involve all the children in operations of the classroom and to give them a feeling that they could influence the success or failure of their experiences in the classroom. We will comment on the role of gifted and talented youth throughout this article.

Weekly Meetings

The weekly meetings were used over a period of 12 years and found to be very productive in improving classroom operations, building classroom morale,

and promoting creative classroom activities. The meetings were about 25 to 35 minutes in length and focused on identifying problems and advancing solutions and new ideas to improve classroom learning. During personal contacts, we communicated to the gifted and talented students that we had high expectations for their participation in these classroom meetings

At the beginning of the year, certain rules were established. This was not the time nor place to air personal grievances against other children, nor was it the time for tattle-tailing. New, high-powered, and creative ideas were welcome. If anyone suggested a new development for the classroom, he or she should also be prepared to work at implementing it. If someone identified a classroom problem, he or she should also be ready to think about possible solutions. Furthermore, whenever someone did not know a big word that was used—and this was done purposely, especially for gifted and talented children—he or she was to ask to have the word written

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on the board and explained or to go to the dictionary in the classroom library and look it up.

The classroom meeting began on Tuesday of the second week of the school year right after lunch, with the teacher serving as chairperson or leader for the first month and then student volunteers serving as chair for the rest of the year. One of the early meetings was devoted to brainstorming guidelines for student volunteer leaders. The children produced many good ideas that they were able to use in future weekly meetings. Several of the early volunteer leaders were gifted and talented children. Once they had volunteered to lead, a meeting was scheduled with the teacher to discuss their plans for the meeting and to develop a preliminary agenda.

Ideas and Projects

Over the period of 12 years conducting room meetings, many good ideas were introduced and developed. At one meeting, a boy, talented on the piano, offered to play the piano for some group singing. The children loved this, and it became a regular feature of the room, with all the children singing at the top of their voices. Of course, other musical instruments were also featured, including violins and flutes.

On yet another occasion, a gifted girl said she had heard from her dad that the great pilot Amelia Earhart had once been a professor at Purdue University. She suggested that we have a special classroom report on Amelia Earhart and volunteered to lead the effort. With a team of four volunteers, the project went forward. With a mother's help on a Saturday, they went to the Purdue library to supplement what they could find in our school library. There they found a lot of information and memorabilia about Amelia Earhart's time as a

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professor at Purdue, and they were able to get some pictures copied for the report. All this effort led to an excellent oral report involving all of the team members. Several of the gifted children had already read a book or two about Amelia Earhart, and they contributed a great deal more during the discussion that followed. The entire effort was a good, challenging, and productive experience for several talented and precocious second graders.

One idea, advanced by a gifted boy, was to have mailboxes for all the children and the teacher. He and a group of several gifted and other children went on to build the mailboxes with milk cartons. At a later meeting, a girl suggested that the children should send notes complementing one another for good, courteous, and creative behaviors. Many

children later reported that they had received such notes and were thrilled to get them.

At one of the meetings, a child asked whether they could send notes to the teacher when they had problems with learning tasks. That was a great idea that was encouraged. Some children found it easier to send notes about problems that they were having than to talk to their teacher about them.

The mailboxes were also an excellent means of communication to the teacher about learning problems. While some of the notes were simple expressions of liking the teacher or enthusiasm for the ball game at recess, some noted a need for help with reading words or the current mathematics lessons. The volume of notes grew throughout the year.

A gifted boy and girl together sent a note saying they wanted to learn long division (this is early in second grade). They were given a fourth-grade math book and told they could study the section on long division and the teacher would meet with them later. About an hour later in the meeting with teacher, it was clear that they had already mastered long division and were very proud of their accomplishment. There were many similar messages, especially from gifted and talented children, asking for opportunities to study advanced topics while the less able and lower achievers most often asked for help with difficulties they were experiencing with lessons. Since there was much emphasis on individualized learning, this was a great help in implementing the overall classroom system.

The room meetings often turned to major events of the day, which were most often noted by one or more of the gifted and talented cluster. Having heard that a professor of veterinary medicine had received a grant of \$1 million, they wondered if that was all to care for cats and dogs. In the discussion that fol-

lowed, one of the children, whose father was a Purdue professor, told the group that the professor did research on large animals so he could help other veterinarians treat such animals. Several children then told about research their fathers were doing.

As an outgrowth of that discussion, several children suggested they would like to do a TV news show and videotape it. Five children (including three gifted) volunteered for that project: one to be the newscaster, one the weather person, one the sports announcer, one the videocamera operator, and one the news director, who would write copy for the announcers. It took the group a week to get organized, and they produced a fine show. The videotape was first viewed by the class and then loaned to individual children to take home for viewing with their parents.

There was much effort to get all the children involved in the room meetings and to contribute ideas. However, a problem noted by many teachers of the gifted is their high level of verbalizing and dominance in discussions. Thus, the class was often broken down into little groups of four to six to discuss and brainstorm solutions to ideas or problems that had been proposed in the room meeting. The gifted cluster consisted of four to six children each year, and they constituted one of the room meeting groups.

One idea, brought up in the room meetings, was to have a talent show the class might perform for other classes. In small groups, they settled on some general areas they would have to consider, such as how to identify all the talents we had in the room, what talents would be included in the show, how to stage the show, whether parents should be invited, and so forth. It ended up taking several meetings of work in the small groups before they could pull it all together to prepare for the show. The gifted and tal-

ented cluster took on the task of identifying the children's talents and what could all be included.

The show went well, but a number of room meetings were devoted to discussing emerging problems, new ideas for the show, and the staging. Finally, the show was performed for parents and all the primary grades. There were gymnasts, impersonators, dancers, clowns, and musicians galore. Some of the performances involved several children at once. They closed with a group sing involving the audience. At the end, the applause was noisy and the children took a well-earned bow. In the next room meeting, they did their own evaluation to identify what went well and what fell short.

Perhaps the dramatic and creative things that were brought forth and dealt with in room meetings have been highlighted too much in this article, so it should be added that every meeting involved some attention to problems with classroom operations, lessons, and learning: waiting in line too long at the pencil sharpener, difficulties with our cluster seating arrangement, how to get more time for library, missing cards in the reading kit, children who stay too long in the reading center, or things missing from the science study center. The children would often be able to think of good solutions to the problems someone had brought up.

The room meeting offers splendid opportunities for both the gifted and talented and all children to participate in operations of the classroom, to advance their best and creative ideas, to identify and solve problems, and to advance their own learning. It works well in all primary grades, but it takes time to help all children learn how to participate and profit from meetings. And, from the teacher's point of view, it is a joy to see children grow and succeed in their capacity to be self-directing and success-

ful contributors to the social milieu in which they live.

Summary

Classroom management can be enhanced and improved a great deal by weekly cooperative class meetings in which gifted and talented children are given opportunities to offer ideas, solutions, and creative insights (Webb & Palincsar, 1996). All children can and should be encouraged to participate and offer ideas, but the advanced thinking skills, creative abilities, and diverse personal and social characteristics of the gifted and talented make them a particularly rich source of ideas for classroom-management ideas. These meetings offered good opportunities for children to learn leadership skills, to engage in cooperative learning to enhance their learning of subject matter, and, for the gifted and talented, to master higher level cognitive and social skills. ©GT

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