



Non-Negotiable Criteria for Middle School

Designing Appropriate Curriculum and Instruction for Gifted Middle-Grade Students

BY KRISTINA J. DOUBET

Middle schoolers, caught between childhood and adulthood need powerful curriculum and instruction tailored to the dramatic physical and emotional changes they are experiencing.

I returned to graduate school after teaching for ten years; this delay has turned out to be both a blessing and a curse. The blessing is that I have plenty of teaching experiences—both successes and mistakes—as well as kid experiences—their struggles and joys—to serve as context for my learning. The concepts and principles I am studying truly make sense in light of what I have stored in my mental and emotional knapsack.

On the other hand, I constantly experience a nagging feeling of regret with the knowledge that I could have done things much better. Granted, I've been affirmed in some of what my "gut" told me was right; but I'm learning so much about the reasons why these things were right including principles which, had I understood them better, would have advanced me from a classroom teacher who served her students pretty well most of the time (with one or two random acts of serendipitous "brilliance" thrown in) to a teacher who truly understood the principles that govern powerful curriculum and instruction for middle-grade learners and for gifted learners. As a result, I would have fashioned my classroom practices according to the following non-negotiable criteria:

- attending to adolescents' state of perpetual change

- harnessing the power of choice, interest, and learning profile
- organizing content around powerful concepts
- consistently providing authentic learning experiences
- employing the skills of empowerment
- consistently accommodating the unique needs of diverse gifted learners

They say that “hindsight is 20/20”; I’m at about 20/40 right now, and I want to share what I wish I had realized on my first go-round.

Powerful curriculum and instruction attends to the state of perpetual change present in every fiber of an adolescent’s being.

I realized my seventh-graders were caught between childhood and adulthood; I heard them talk to one another about “playing outside after school” one minute and the next read their heart-wrenching essays about how they struggled with adult-sized problems: fears of abandonment and rejection, concern over the safety of their friends and families, and peer-pressures as heavy as mountains on fragile shoulders. I listened to parents lament, incredulous over the changes in their children: “He didn’t use to be like this,” “She won’t talk to me,” and even “Who is this child?” I stared at my students in surprise when they returned from holiday break, many of them seeming to have grown an inch taller in their brief absence.

I did not, however, realize the magnitude of this change—that “No other period of human development, except that immediately after birth, is characterized by such dramatic change” (Davies, 2000, 159-160). I did not realize that the physical growth and change they were experiencing both drained them of energy and infused them with the need to constantly move and stretch. I did not realize that they were honestly undergoing an identity crisis that left them wrestling with the questions, “Who am I?” “How do I fit?” “What do others think of me?” and “What do I do to make myself worthy?” Had I known the depth of these struggles, I would have tailored my curriculum and instruction in such a way that it would have given my students opportunities to examine these questions in the context of our subject matter; after all, the themes of their lives are the themes of all the disciplines. I would have provided more chances

for students to reflect on what they were doing well, to set goals, and to determine the steps they would need to take to reach those goals. I would have more deliberately affirmed them in their strengths and bolstered them in their areas of weakness.

Powerful curriculum and instruction harness the power of choice, interest, and learning profile.

The longer I taught, the more I recognized the value of providing students with assignment choices. I generally provided at least two alternatives for final products that gave students the chance to demonstrate their learning in the manner of their choosing. I noted increased investment and interest as students worked on assignments which they had some “say” in completing. I reasoned that it offered them some control over their world, as well



“Creating authentic products and engaging in authentic processes are means of appealing to the inherent need of middle-grade students to understand ‘why we need to learn this.’”

as a certain degree of freedom, and that seemed important to me. What I didn’t know was that I was only scratching the surface and that had I really let go of the reins and provided my students with more choice—not only in the demonstration of what they learned, but also in *how* they learned it—my students would have grasped material at a deeper level. I recognized that some students were more artistic, some more verbal, others more movement oriented than others. I tried to provide these avenues for learn-

ing whenever I could but did so in full-class activities. Had I better understood the importance of attending to my students’ learning profiles, I could have structured tasks so that students could select their preferred modes and work on separate tasks to demonstrate a common learning goal.

Howard Gardner and Robert Sternberg offer insight into more than simply how to diversify product options; they ultimately provide windows into students’ minds through which I could have looked to understand how they learned best. Had I truly grasped this, I would have let students pursue learning through the means that best worked with their brain “set-ups.” I would have been careful to design final product options that allowed even more freedom for students to select the modes of expression that best reflected how they learned. I would have provided opportunities for them to integrate their own passions and interests, as well. In doing so, I also would have done a better job of providing learning opportunities that attended to the unique learning needs associated with the various cultures and backgrounds represented in my classroom; every culture has unique patterns of acquiring and processing information, as well as sharing it with others. The more I paid attention to those patterns and sought to flexibly accommodate them, the more I would have equipped all my students for success.

Finally, although I would have decreased the prescriptive nature of *how* my students accomplished tasks, I would have tightened the orchestration, specificity, and depth of what I ultimately wanted them to demonstrate—my critical learning goals for them. One way to accomplish this would have been to reorganize my curriculum around concepts and principles.

Powerful curriculum is organized around overarching, unifying concepts.

The most powerful unit my students and I experienced together was our science fiction unit. I’m not a “Trekky,” and I’m not naturally drawn to the Isaac Asimov-type of deep science fiction literature, but teaching this unit was one of my favorite parts of the year. It was extraordinary. I think this was because at some point, my students and I discovered that every story we read was not really about the future, per se, but about our present-day values and what would happen to our world if we persisted with them.

With this conceptual lens, we examined stories in a new light—the light of the world around us. We pulled in principles from science, lessons from history, and current events. We examined the media to find reflections of our values and then read stories that portrayed a society clinging to those very same values and suffering for it. We talked about our futures and the roles we could play in shaping them and in shaping the world around us.

This was powerful teaching. This was powerful learning. This was concept-based instruction though I didn't know it at the time. I thought I was teaching a "theme" lesson and that the theme was "science fiction," but it was the *concept of values* that united the pieces we read and provided "worm-holes" through which we could tunnel to reach other disciplines and the world around us. Had I recognized this, I would have reorganized all my content around such powerful ideas.

I could have shared this discovery with my interdisciplinary teammates with the new understanding that concept-based teaching is powerful in any discipline—not just English. For example, my colleague who taught life science could have organized a unit, or even an entire course, around the concept of "interdependence," consistently asking students to explore the ways in which changes to one part of a system (e.g. cell, ecosystem, or food chain) would affect all the other parts of that system. Like my science fiction unit, such teaching would have cultivated *transfer* and *lifelong* learning in students as they continued to spontaneously connect ideas from other units and classes back to that conceptual foundation.

Powerful curriculum and instruction consistently provide authentic learning experiences.

Early on, I learned that at least in writing, giving my students an audience and role was important; it infused their writing with a sense of purpose and meaning. Some of my favorite assignments were those in which I asked my students to behave as case-workers assigned to troubled characters in a novel—to explain what made them tick and provide recommendations for what was needed to "cure their ills." My students also enjoyed acting as music producers hired to create a soundtrack of popular music representative of a book they had read that was being turned into a movie. It made sense to them to persist in explaining connections

between a song's title, lyrics, and mood just as a novel's content needed to be connected with the purpose of attempting to have their selections included on the soundtrack. In both of these instances, students had a role, a purpose, and an audience; but in both cases, these roles, purposes, and audiences were less than authentic.

The most *powerful* project my students pursued was one in which their role, purpose, and audience were *real*; they were put in charge of creating children's books to help teach difficult concepts to a class of struggling first-graders in order to help them prepare for upcoming state tests. When my students discovered that the use of poetic devices, integral conflict, recurring symbols—the very stuff of their own curriculum—could be used to help a real audience (with a real need) understand *its* curriculum, the task suddenly gained authenticity and importance. As a result, students' investment, effort, and willingness to grapple with their own material increased exponentially. Had I harnessed this insight and applied it to more areas of my curriculum, I am sure that I would have seen significant increases across-the-board. Creating authentic products and engaging in authentic processes are means of appealing to the inherent need of middle-grade students to understand "why we need to learn this." Utilizing community resources to serve as authentic audiences can greatly increase student energy and investment. And in asking students to don the hat of an author, a scientist, a historian, or a mathematician, I provide them with a vehicle that will transport them deep into the heart of the discipline they are studying.

Powerful curriculum and instruction employ the skills of empowerment.

If students were to don any of the hats described above, they would ultimately engage in the process of inquiry. This discovery process lights a fire in middle-graders' hearts for they much prefer "uncovering" material to simply "covering" it (Wiggins & McTighe, 1998). By nature I teach deductively; my favorite complaint from students was that I had once again "tricked them into learning" by designing activities that encouraged them to work together to discover patterns and figure things out. I realize now that I could have more deliberately planned my students' inquiries so that they followed the thought and work processes of experts in

their disciplines. In doing so, my students would have developed a deeper understanding of content—one they could carry with them into their future courses—one that could take them beyond engagement into the heart of the content's infrastructure and relationships—one that could fuse higher order thinking skills with the essence of the subject matter. I also now realize that inquiries span time periods and disciplines. The history teacher on my team understood this and frequently asked her students to examine current world problems in light of parallel historical events. Had my multidisciplinary teammates and I "put our heads together" more frequently, we could have designed problem-based learning situations that drew upon multiple subjects to solve real-life problems.

Powerful curriculum and instruction consistently accommodates the unique needs of diverse gifted learners

The lessons I have discussed thus far do not apply only to gifted students; they are appropriate for all learners. For high-ability learners, however, they are imperative as they form the foundation of curriculum and instruction which is deep, meaningful, and relevant. They serve as a launching pad for extension and enrichment opportunities tailored to meet the specific needs of high-ability learners.

I am now able to acknowledge a truth that I was reticent to concede while teaching—that even my ability-grouped "advanced" classes were not homogeneous in terms of their readiness. Within those classes of rapidly changing adolescents, I had students who were operating at diverse levels of cognitive ability at many different times and in various arenas. They had differing "zones of proximal development," as Vygotsky (1978) calls them. Although I felt justified in treating them the same in their intellectual profile since they were all identified as "gifted," I realize now that I should have adjusted the following areas of my curriculum and instruction to make sure I was challenging each and every advanced learner in my care:

Flexible grouping. At times, I grouped my gifted students according to their interests in order to have access to peers who shared their excitement and passion. In retrospect, I should have also grouped more frequently according to *learning profile* (as discussed above). I also should have given them the opportunity to work in groups of

like *readiness* in order to supply the extra degree of challenge they needed to develop their full academic potential.

Assessment. I was, unfortunately, primarily a “summative” assessor, grading projects and tests at the end of learning experiences to see if students “got it.” Had I incorporated more on-going formative assessment, I would have done a better job of forming the flexible groups described above. In addition, I could have utilized more self-assessments and rubrics featuring expert-level criteria to design the most appropriate instructional “fits” possible for my students.

Pacing. Assessments would have provided me with the data I needed to make appropriate pacing adjustments for my students. Some needed to progress more *quickly* through material they grasped easily; others needed to move more *slowly and deliberately* through topics they wanted to explore more thoroughly. I should have allowed them this freedom.

Resources and materials. My gifted students benefited from having access to supplementary materials that were at a challenging reading level or heightened level of expertise; I should have provided these more consistently as well as have provided my students with a greater variety of authentic print, nonprint, and human resources.

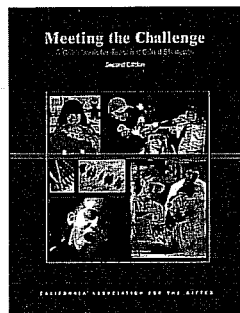
Teaching gifted middle-grade students is both a joy and a challenge. Had I better understood the principles outlined above, I believe that I would have experienced even more joy! What could be more rewarding than to see students consistently engaged, challenged, and steeped in the very essence of the discipline in such a way that they discover more of themselves in the process? Such teaching cultivates lifelong learning in students. My students, who were really my teachers, have certainly cultivated that in me! ■

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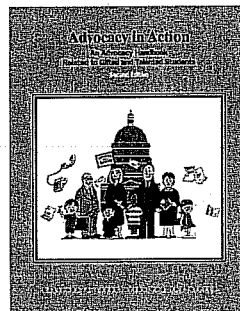


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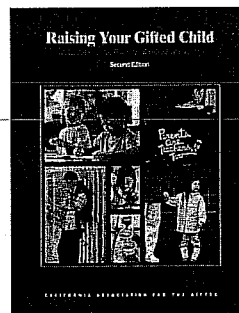
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