



Interview

Developing and Implementing School for Highly Gifted, Exceptionally Gifted, and Profoundly Gifted Students: An Interview with Lynette BreedLove

ABSTRACT: According to research, while moderately gifted students can often fit in the regular classrooms with differentiated instructions, pull-out programs, or acceleration options, highly gifted students do better when they are grouped with other intellectually-advanced peers in accordance with their strengths, interests, and background knowledge of a topic. Each of these students requires special attention and management strategies to develop better cognitive, social, emotional, and physical skills. Thanks to the grouping strategy, highly gifted students can study concepts at the appropriate pace, depth, and complexity so that these students feel valued and normal (Neville, 2007; Rogers, 2007). In order to fully meet these students' needs, creating a school for highly, exceptionally, and profoundly gifted students would be a more beneficial plan compared to requiring them to stay within the regular classroom, accelerating, or grade skipping. Rogers (2002) pointed out that these students showed more academic growth by studying with other intellectual peers in separate classrooms. According to VanTassel-Baska (2006), identification, curriculum, program design, staff development, parental involvement assessment, and evaluation areas were essential for gifted program development. In accordance with the program development guidelines noted above, in this presentation, the process of developing and implementing a program for highly gifted students in Science, Math, Reading, and Social Studies will be provided based on an interview with Lynette Breedlove, Ph.D. who is the director of Advanced Academic Studies & Secondary Counseling at Spring Branch Independent School District in Houston, TX.

Key words: highly gifted students, identification, developing highly gifted school, differentiation, enrichment, acceleration.

This interview was presented at ICTDE 2013 Conference as a proceeding.

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Received:08 Sept 2013
Accepted:12 Nov 2013

Karaduman: Can you describe your academic background? How did you start working with gifted students and what motivated you to develop a program for highly gifted students?

Breedlove: I have B.A. in Psychology from Rhodes College in Memphis, Tennessee. I have a M.Ed. in Gifted Education from University of St. Thomas in Houston, Texas. And I completed my Ph.D. in Educational Psychology with emphasis in Intelligence, Creativity, and Giftedness from Texas A&M University. It took me some time to discover that education was the right field for me. My first year of teaching my special education resource room was across the hall from the gifted and talented facilitator's room. We became close friends and the facilitator began mentoring me. She introduced me to gifted education and advocated with my principal that I be considered for her position when she retired. I moved into a 5th grade classroom and began teaching GT and general education students while I attended professional development in gifted education and then began my master's degree.

As the director of gifted programming, I started seeing an increase in the number of highly gifted children we were trying to serve in our program. We worked hard to meet their needs through a series of single subject acceleration and grade skips. However, there were often hurdles. The schedule was very difficult and the students often had to integrate into multiple classrooms for parts of the day. And even though we were accommodating their academic needs, they still didn't have a place to truly fit. So we began working to design a program specifically for them - to design a place that meets all of their needs

Karaduman: What is unique about highly intellectual gifted students?

Breedlove: The level of asynchronous develops them experience is exceptional. They have extreme strengths combined with average development in other areas. Meeting the needs of a child who needs geometry, 5th grade science, 4 grade language arts, and 3rd grade physical education all at once is tricky. The more typical gifted student doesn't have these extreme differences. In addition, the students are often intense in many ways.

Karaduman: According to longitudinal research with highly gifted students such as Hollingworth (1931), Terman et al. (1947), these students demonstrate early development of speech and learning. What characteristics should a child

have to be identified as highly gifted in your program?

Breedlove: The students in our program are usually 2 or 3 grade levels ahead in reading or mathematics. Their parents describe their learning to read on their own extremely early. They also describe their children creating puzzles, codes, and math problems at 2 and 3 years old. They are voracious learners who constantly seek learning opportunities and novelty. It can be hard for parents to keep up with their children's need to seek information and new learning.

Karaduman: What kinds of courses are offered for students in the Spring Branch School for Highly Gifted Students? What modifications and differentiations render these courses adequate for highly gifted students?

Breedlove: Our current program serves students who are age appropriate for kindergarten through 4th grade (ages 5 - 9). The program will expand with the children, adding a grade level each year. They must meet the same state standards for coursework and graduation requirements as other students in our system, but we expect them to do that easily and sometimes earlier than their age peers. For that reason, their instruction is enhanced with independent student and inquiry. All students are receiving individualized math instruction through Stanford's EPGY. The math teacher enhances this with problem-solving challenges, and hands-on enrichment for small groups. There are numerous small groups for reading. Children are grouped by readiness and reading level, rather than by age. Social studies and science instruction is multi-age, based on big concepts. The combination of multi-age readiness groups, individualized instruction, and independent study is keeping the students challenged and growing.

Karaduman: In light of the research demonstrating that highly gifted students often feel isolated for various reasons, such as their small population and emotional development issues, this program first addresses this challenge by uniting these few students and allowing them to connect with similar peers. Are there any other features of your program that address these social development challenges?

Breedlove: The students have a whole school project to work on as a team. They are designing a fine arts quiet space. Some of the students need a quiet place as a respite to the noise and

activity in the classroom. The students are working together to design a room that fits that need. In addition, they have a shared game time. The game time is structured to help them learn to interact with one another in social situations. By learning to socialize with one another, they can learn skills to apply in other groups and situations.

Karaduman: Similarly, another issue would be the tendency of highly gifted students toward introversion. As a consequence of this tendency, these students often prefer to study independently and possess strong intrinsic motivation. According to Terman et al.'s longitudinal study (1947) this is because of a natural cognitive orientation. Does your program feature any modifications in order to respond to this characteristic?

Breedlove: The program has time set aside for independent study. This time has been included to allow students to pursue individual areas of interest. Students also have choices when they want to work in a group or alone to accommodate those who are introverted.

Karaduman: In your opinion, what are the characteristics of an effective instructor of highly gifted students? What specific skills do you look for when selecting teachers in your program?

Breedlove: Teachers must be extremely flexible. They need to be able to meet the students' greatly varied needs. They must be able to teach students at an extremely high level who also have very average needs in other subject areas. Most of the students have difficulty writing, so the teachers need to be able to find ways to help students express their complex ideas in multiple ways. Teachers must also be ready to constantly feed the students' need for new learning. Highly gifted students thrive on novelty, but new information is novel for a very short time with students who process information so quickly.

This school needs teachers who can respect the students' intellect while still seeing the students as children and meeting their other developmental needs. The teachers must be okay teaching students much more intelligent than they are themselves, and to see themselves as facilitators rather than teachers providing direct instruction.

In addition, the teachers need to have extremely strong communication skills. Highly gifted children have very intense parents with strong opinions and a need to be involved. Teachers need to be able to partner with parents

in the teaching of students, drawing parents in to the classroom in a productive partnership.

Karaduman: To maximize the effectiveness of the program, what do you require and recommend from the parents of the highly gifted students in your program?

Breedlove: The director of the school has spent a great deal of time building rapport and trust with the parents. She has worked to build a relationship with each family. Before school, the director met one on one with each family to learn more about the parents' hopes and concerns in the education of their children. In addition, she has built in ways for parents to contribute in the day to day activities of the school - particularly lunch and recess. We have asked the parents to be patient as the school develops. There are many unknowns because the school is so new, so there will be unanticipated problems that come up that have to be solved quickly. The director has promised to keep parents well informed and so far things seem to be going smoothly.

Karaduman: Considering that your program is the only program for highly gifted students in the Houston area, what do you recommend for parents and instructors of highly gifted students who do not have this opportunity in their community?

Breedlove: Students who are highly gifted but don't have a seat in our school can benefit from acceleration in a typical school program. Parents should be proactive and ask lots of questions from school administrators and counselors to gauge their support of meeting the needs of highly gifted students. Making an appointment with the principal and teacher to meet the student is important. The parents might ask the school administrator if the student can be tested to determine his/her level of mastery. When the school does the assessment themselves, they tend to be more invested in the results. When talking about single subject acceleration and/or grade skipping, be prepared for the school personnel to express concern about socialization issues. Providing the data from A National Deceived can help.

Karaduman: How do you advertise about your program to the community?

Breedlove: Parents of highly gifted students tend to have their own network. Our program is advertised via word of mouth outside of the district, primarily. However, we have had two favorable newspaper articles published in our

city newspaper recently. We notified parents of students who are identified as highly gifted through our district GT identification process by email and letter. Since there are strict qualifications for entrance, we have tried to be careful about advertising. This school isn't for everyone, so we need to be cautious not to advertise it to everyone. Our targeted information and word of mouth seems to have filled our seats.

Karaduman: What resources and processes do you employ in order to fund this program?

Breedlove: The program is fully funded by local school district funds. It is quite expensive and the funds expended for gifted education in our district far outweighs what we receive from the state. While we have looked for grant funds, we have not found any that tie to our model or population. We are hoping to build a partnership with a university for services which we don't yet offer. That may help us identify other sources of funding.

Karaduman: What do you recommend to any team attempting to develop a program for highly gifted students in their community?

Breedlove: Research! Research! Research!. Take your time and build a thorough plan. You need to education a diverse group of people about the needs of this special population, and then highlight others who are meeting their needs. The community of folks who education highly gifted children and those who run school exclusively for gifted children are a very friendly and supportive group. Reach out to them for their expertise. Taking time will allow you to gently educate those who will be the final decision makers, too.

Karaduman: Do you have any final comments or thoughts for the International Conference on Talent Development & Excellence 2013 in Turkey?

Breedlove: This is a very worthwhile endeavor. Seeing the students in an environment that was built just for them is amazing. They now have friends and the parents now have a community. These are special needs children who have a right to appropriate education like every other group of students.

Editor's Note

Dr. Lynette Breedlove is the director of Advanced Academic Studies and Secondary Counseling at Spring Branch ISD. She currently coordinates district career and college preparatory workshops, oversees the Gifted and

Talented, Advanced Placement, Pre-Advanced Placement, and International Baccalaureate programs K-12 as well as secondary counseling enlarge public school district. Additionally, Dr. Breedlove conducts professional development in gifted education, specializing in preparing teachers for the GT certification exam and the intensities of giftedness. Dr. Breedlove was the immediate past president at the Texas Association for the Gifted and Talented. She received her Ph.D. from Texas A&M University in Educational Psychology - Intelligence, Creativity, & Giftedness. *Contact Information* Advanced Academic Studies & Secondary Counseling, Spring Branch ISD, 2100 Shadowdale Houston, Texas 77043; Lynette.Breedlove@springbranchisd.com

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