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Abstract

School improvement efforts often focus on students who perform below grade level. These improvement efforts typically focus on improving instruction, often through a framework and professional development. The question remains, how do students who are gifted and talented respond to this type of instruction? We observed 48 students in their classrooms, interviewed them, and then held focus groups to gain their perspectives on the instructional framework being implemented. The students suggested that teacher modeling was valuable, that group work should include accountability, and that homework should be reasonable. They had mixed views on the importance of a clearly stated learning target and did not experience any small group instruction. Recommendations for school improvement that are inclusive of students who are gifted are included.

Keywords

school improvement, adolescents, gifted, instruction

The language of school improvement dominates discussions in virtually all aspects of secondary education. It is almost unheard of for a school administrator to entertain the prospect of an innovative program or policy without giving consideration to the implications for standardized test scores. During the past decade alone, large-scale efforts have included creating small learning communities out of large comprehensive high

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schools (Levine, 2005) and pay-for-performance incentives for teachers (Marsh & McCaffrey, 2011). More recently, federal programs such as Race to the Top promise to provide substantial fiscal resources in exchange for raising achievement levels at low-performing schools. In all cases, a major, and appropriate, yardstick for assessing effectiveness has been academic achievement changes for low-performing students.

By comparison, far less attention has been dedicated to achievement among high-performing students. Trend analysis of the same time period on the reading and mathematics portions of National Assessment of Educational Progress reveals that the scores of high-achieving students have stagnated, with virtually no growth or a slight decline since 1971 (Rampey, Dion, & Donahue, 2009). This is significant, given the variety of programmatic efforts studied among high-achieving students, including specialized coursework for gifted and talented students and magnet schools designed to attract high-achieving minority students. However, it has been argued that the overwhelming attention to raising the achievement levels of low-performing students has resulted in the benign neglect of high-achieving ones (Epstein, Pianko, Schnur, & Wyner, 2011).

Quality Instructional Practice

Instructional excellence is foundational to school improvement. Quality instruction has been integral to comprehensive school reform models, regardless of their content focus, including literacy efforts such as Success for All, America's Choice, and Accelerated Schools Project (Correnti & Rowan, 2007). Other efforts have focused on improving instructional practice by building teacher content knowledge in mathematics (Hill, Rowan, & Ball, 2005; Slavin, 1999). Even charter schools that emphasize student motivation within a college-going culture, such as KIPP and the Harlem Children's Zone, note quality instruction is essential to their success. These large-scale efforts, as well as those designed and implemented at the local level, have invested significant fiscal and human resources into extending the amount and quality of instructional time students receive (Corey, Phelps, Ball, Demonte, & Harrison, 2012).

Efforts to improve the achievement of all students have resulted in scripted lesson, structured teaching, and district frameworks for instruction (Betts, 2009; Crocco & Costigan, 2007). An analysis of these efforts suggests that there are some common patterns. For example, lessons include an objective or learning target, sometimes called a purpose statement (Marzano, 2009). In addition, many instructional frameworks suggest that teachers model their thinking for students (Santa, 2006). Furthermore, instructional reformers recommend that students spend time in collaborative or cooperating learning situations with their peers so that they can integrate and apply what they have been taught (Klassen & Krawchuk, 2009). There are also recommendations to formatively assess students and provide additional instruction for students who do not understand the content (Kaftan, Buck, & Haack, 2006).

These instructional improvement efforts are typically focused on improving the outcomes of students who do not perform well in school, in part due to state and

federal accountability and in part due to the poor futures adolescents who struggle in school will face (Dee & Jacob, 2011; Duke & Jacobson, 2011). But schools are not filled with only students who struggle. The question remains, how have the efforts to raise achievement through instructional frameworks affected students who achieve well? In this study, we ask gifted and talented middle and high school students themselves about the instructional framework that was implemented in their school district over several years. In terms of publicly available data, overall achievement has increased. A closer look at these data suggest that the goals of state and federal regulations have been addressed as there are fewer numbers of students who score in the lowest quartile of achievement. Although data on the achievement of the highest performing students are not available, their reactions to, and recommendations about, the school improvement efforts might influence future efforts to maintain quality schools.

Methodology

To answer the research question, we employed the qualitative tradition of phenomenology (Creswell, 2007). Phenomenological studies are useful when the researcher wants to understand the meaning, structure, and essence of a lived experience. This approach has been used to understand a wide range of educational issues, from teacher-student teacher relationships (Giles, 2010) to mathematics education (Brown, 1996). In essence, the phenomenological approach allows researchers a glimpse in to the world as others see it (Van Manen, 1990). The first step in this approach is to bracket a priori knowledge such that the “essential structures of the experience as it was lived” can be identified (Kerry & Armour, 2000, p. 9).

Participants

A total of 48 students, Grades 7 to 12, from nine middle and high schools in one district participated in this study. Of these students, 29 were female and 19 were male and 30 of them (62%) qualified for free lunch. In terms of ethnicity, 19 (40%) were Hispanic/Latino, 14 (28%) were Asian/Pacific Islanders, 8 (17%) were African or African American, and 7 (15%) were Caucasian. These students were purposefully selected from a pool of students who met the following criteria: (a) they had been enrolled in a district using a structured teaching approach for at least 3 years, (b) they had participated in a gifted and talented program for at least 3 years, and (c) they scored advanced on a recent state exam. Thus, this student group experienced success at school and had experience with a number of different teachers who used a structured approach to teaching. In this district, the structured approach to teaching required that every lesson include an objective or purpose statement; that teachers model their thinking aloud for students daily; that teachers guide students to deeper levels of understanding through their strategic use of questions, prompts, and cues rather than retelling students information that has already been presented; that students work collaboratively for approximately 50% of the instructional minutes; and

that independent tasks are a regular part of the classroom. For more information on this approach, see Fisher and Frey (2008).

Instruments and Procedures

Observations. Each student was observed in a classroom setting on two different occasions. The observations lasted the entire class period, between 55 and 90 minutes depending on the location and day observed. We observed each student in an English class. The second observation was done in a content area classroom, and 16 students were observed in mathematics, 16 in science, and 16 in history/social studies. Extensive field notes were collected during each of the observations, including the use of components of the structured teaching approach. Both the observations were conducted before scheduling an interview with a student. In some cases, the teachers were not fully implementing the structured teaching approach advocated by the district and we noted aspects that were missing.

Interviews. Each student was interviewed individually using a semistructured protocol. The interviews took between 28 and 55 minutes and were digitally recorded and transcribed. The interviews occurred at a variety of times during and after school, depending on when each student was available. The questions included opportunities to describe a typical day at school, to explain the various instructional methods that their teachers used, and to comment on the effectiveness of the various instructional methods that the students named or that we observed in their classrooms. All the interviews were conducted before scheduling the focus groups.

Focus groups. Three focus groups of four students each were scheduled to allow students an opportunity to discuss their experiences with the structured teaching approach. These sessions were scheduled after school and lasted between 75 and 95 minutes. As the facilitators of these focus groups, we posed questions, based on our analysis of the observations and interviews. These semistructured questions included the following:

- Lots of students talked about teacher modeling. Do you think that is important? Why?
- What is the role of homework in your classrooms?
- We heard a lot about group work being different now. How so?
- We didn't hear a lot about guided instruction. That's when the teacher meets with a group while others are working. Do you have any examples of this?
- We saw teachers relating the purpose in nearly every classroom. Is that useful to you?

Data Analysis

We analyzed the data in successive rounds, starting with the observations. We used a constant comparative method (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) in which categories were

created as each transcript was reviewed. We reread the transcripts several times through to determine if categories added later in the analysis were missing data from earlier observations or interviews. As part of our analysis, we highlighted representative quotes for each of the major themes identified.

Although the observations revealed a number of interesting findings about teachers' implementation of the structured teaching approach, their main purpose in this study was to provide information that could be used in the interviews and focus groups. In preparation for each interview, we used the analysis from the observations to determine the focus of the components of the structured teaching approach. Similarly, we completed the analysis of the interviews as they informed the questions we asked during the focus group sessions. Once the focus groups had been completed and that data analyzed, we produced a draft of the findings. These findings were shared with three purposefully selected students for a member check, a useful approach to determine whether or not the researchers have presented the phenomenon as the participants themselves see it (Neuman, 1997).

Limitations

Like every study, this investigation had a number of limitations. First, the pool of students was limited to those within a school system that had been working on structured teaching. As a result, the findings may be different if data were collected from students with less or different experiences. Second, the data come exclusively from students. Although this study focused on students' perspectives, there are other perspectives worthy of investigation as systems implement instructional models. Having said that, the perspectives of students in school reform are an important, and often overlooked, area (Brozo, 2006). Finally, the sample size of this study was limited based on the number of students who met the inclusion criteria.

Findings

Overall, gifted students' perspectives on structured teaching were positive. They recognized their teachers' attempts to convey complex information and to "meet the needs of everyone in the class," as one 10th grader said. There were several areas that were identified by the students as especially helpful and one area that seemed to be neglected.

Teacher Modeling

In classroom observations, we regularly observed teachers model their thinking. Commonly this was done through a think aloud process in which teachers read a text or problem and then talked about their cognitive and metacognitive approach to understanding the text or solving the problem. As part of the teacher modeling, over 90% of the teachers used "I statements" as part of their modeling and over 80% of

them included metacognitive statements such as “because.” For example, we observed a math teacher solve a problem involving bases and exponents. As part of his modeling, he said,

I see that the bases are different, which means that I can't set the exponents as equal. My first step is to see if the bases have any factors in common because if they do, I can create equal bases and then I'll know that the exponents are equal. I think that I will use factoring because it can help me see patterns. [pause] Oh, I see the pattern. It's five. The base on this side is 10, or five times two, and the base on this side is 25, or five times five.

In a history class, the teacher modeled his thinking about an editorial cartoon. He displayed the cartoon on the document camera and shared his thinking with students, saying,

I'm seeing a DJ that's a donkey and I remember from our other lessons that the donkey is the sign of the Democratic Party. So, this must be a comment about some democratic idea because of the donkey. I'm seeing a bunch of older ladies and they seem to be dancing to the DJ's music. I'm not sure why so I'll look at some of the other details. The song that's playing is called “I won't touch entitlements,” which is interesting because I know from current events that there is a lot of concern among older people about cuts to their benefits such as prescription medications, transportation, health care, and retirement benefits. I think that this means that the Democrats are playing a song for the older folks promising not to cut their benefits. The caption at the bottom reads, “Yo, this broken record has won me *lots* of Grammys.” Oh, now I understand, there is a play on words: *Grammy* as in the music awards and *grannys* as in the older ladies. It's interesting that the creator said “broken record” because I think that means that the same song has been playing over and over again because I remember my mom used to say that to me when I told her the same thing. She would say, “You sound like a broken record.” I guess that didn't really mean literally broken or cracked, but like old school discs that would get stuck and play the same lines over and over. I guess that this author is trying to say that the Democrats are playing the same song, no cuts to benefits, and the older folks are still believing and supporting them.

Each of the 48 students discussed the positive impact that teacher modeling had on their thinking at some point in the interview. They noted that teacher modeling helped them think about the content or validated their thinking about the content. As a 9th grader noted, “It's like teachers are in my mind, saying what I'm thinking.” An 8th grade student noted, “I don't always solve the problem the same way as my math teacher so I really like it when I hear him talking about how he did it. It gives me something else to think about.” One of the 11th graders put it this way, “It's like you get to be a little voyeuristic and get inside the teacher's brain.”

Productive Group Work

Student-to-student interaction and collaborative learning were regularly observed in the classrooms of these 48 students. In 46 of 48 observations in English (96%), 16 of 16 observations in science (100%), 13 of 16 in history/social science (81%), and 8 of 16 in math (50%), students were observed working in groups. Sometimes, there was a group task to be completed while other times students were individually accountable for their contributions to the group.

For example, in a history classroom students were creating PowerPoint presentations. The groups seemed to be working well together and the teacher moved around the room, interacting with various groups at different times. Based on the group we observed closely and a review of the task sheet provided to the students, individual students were not accountable for their own contributions. Rather, the group would be held accountable for the product and each member of the group would receive a single, collective grade. In four classrooms, we observed students engaged in think-pair-share activities in which they discussed their ideas with a partner before being asked to share with the whole class. In one classroom, we observed the teacher use opinion stations in which students moved to a corner of the room based on their response to a statement from the teacher (strongly agree, agree, disagree, or strongly disagree) and then discuss their ideas with others who held similar ideas. In another classroom, we observed students walking around the room in groups of three, discussing information that the teacher had posted on the wall. We learned that this was a collaborative review for an upcoming assessment. In each of these cases, students were not held individually accountable for their contributions to the group and the purpose seemed to be an opportunity for students to share their thinking with others.

In most classrooms we observed collaborative learning for which students were individually accountable for their contributions. For example, in a science class students were working on developing a PowerPoint presentation consisting of six slides. Before opening their laptops to work, they had to storyboard each of the six slides on either paper or large dry erase boards. Each member of the group had to contribute, in writing, to each slide. The teacher moved from group to group, asking students about their contributions and engaging students in follow-up discussions based on their responses to her questions.

In several English classes we observed students in literature circles or book clubs. When we joined these groups it was clear that each student had an assigned role. Each student also had notes in a notebook. They contributed to the discussion based on their respective roles and submitted their notebooks to the teacher on a regular basis. In other English classes, we observed students engaged in peer editing of their essays. Each student had a checklist of items to review in another person's paper. A look at these checklists revealed a range of items and at least three different versions within the same classroom. Students were accountable for their reviews as they had to sign the bottom of the checklist and the writer had to include this peer feedback when submitting the paper.

In a mathematics class, students were creating collaborative posters in which each student had to contribute to the poster in writing in an assigned color marker. This accountability allowed the teacher to check for understanding and provide students with feedback about their work. In another mathematics classroom, the teacher used die to identify which student to call on. The first roll of the die indicated the person number, such as Person 3. Following this roll, she encouraged all members of the table team to review their thinking with the person in the group who might be called on. She then rolled the die again, identifying the table number, such as Table 6. Then, Person 3 from Table 6 would be asked to share his or her thinking about a given problem. In this way, each student was accountable for the answer and there was a great deal of conversation among the students.

In the interviews, students regularly commented on the group tasks that they were asked to do. Of the 48 students, 44 indicated that they enjoyed working with peers. As one student said, "It makes the time go faster when you get to do the work." Another said, "I like to hear what other people think because it really makes it solid in my mind." Another commented, "I think that this is more real-world. It's how people work together to solve problems. It's not like someone is just going to be alone working on a problem; people work together." And still another noted, "I really like working in a group. I wish we could do that in math because that's my weakest subject and I think I would learn more if we had more time with groups."

The students who did not enjoy working in groups held two reasons for their beliefs. First, as one of the students, a senior, noted, "This is not how college is going to be. You don't get help from others. You have to be able to do the work alone." Second, all four of the students who said that did not enjoy group work indicated that they could get the work done faster if they could do it alone. In the words of one 10th grader,

I know that it's probably good for the group because more people learn more when they work together. I get why the teachers do that. But, for me, it would just be faster if I could do it alone. I really don't need the group to be successful. I get this stuff the first time and I know it.

In terms of the type of group work, there was consensus across interviewees that being held individually accountable was preferable. In response to the question about classroom instruction, nearly every student discussed collaborative learning and noted the differences between group activities and individual accountability within those activities. As a 7th grader stated,

I used to have to do a lot of the work for other people in my group, like in 5th grade or whatever. I think this is better. We help each other, but then each person has to do some work. I kinda got tired of always doing all of the work.

A 9th grader said,

I really like group work because I like to work with my friends. Really, there isn't anyone in the class that I can't work with, but it makes it better when we all know that we are responsible for participating. Sometimes, when it's just for a group grade, some people don't really do the work. I guess that gets me frustrated, but I don't mind too much because I know that I'm still learning.

During the focus group, this issue received a great deal of attention. When the group of academically talented students was in a room together talking about instruction, they started sharing stories about specific classrooms in which they are accountable for the learning, as well as those where there was little. As one of them said,

We all know which classes demand our attention and which don't. I think all of the students know that. So, if there is not some assigned responsibility when we work together, some students let others do the work. The problem is that then they don't learn and our school looks bad when the state tests come around. One of my teachers said that it was about motivation and that students should be motivated to participate but I think that teachers have to help and motivate students who are not yet motivated to learn the content.

Homework

The homework practices we observed varied widely. Some teachers did not assign homework; others did. Some teachers assigned content based on the lesson of the day while others assigned content that had been previously taught. Some teachers included homework in the grade, while others used it for participation and still others did not count it at all. It was clear that there were no guidelines or policies for homework. Interestingly, only 28 of the students talked about homework during the interviews. To a student, those who did discuss homework were clear that they did not mind homework as long as it was reasonable and relevant. As one student said, "I think that I get extra homework because I'm doing so well in the class." Another said, "I don't really like teachers to know that I'm smart because then they want me to do a lot of extra work that really doesn't matter." An 11th grader commented,

I have a lot going on in my life. I really like all of the things that I do, like my church, cheerleading, and my friends. I don't mind homework if it's going to help me, but it seems that a lot of it is busywork and then it gets in the way of some of the other things that I think are important.

During the focus group, we specifically asked students what type of homework they thought was best. The response was overwhelming. The students wanted homework that was familiar and that allowed them practice. Without saying it in these exact words, they were looking for spiral review assignments. One 8th grader explained,

I think it's best when you get homework that you know how to do, but that the problems are different. So then you can try out what you know on new problems rather than have to teach yourself new stuff.

A 9th grader gave an example,

When we were working on our essays, we practiced writing introductions in class for a few days, and then we had homework to write our own introductions. Then we did supporting evidence in class for a while and then did that in our essays. The result was the best essay that I have ever written, and I'm really not that good of a writer yet.

When we asked the members of the focus group what the biggest problems with homework were, they named three issues. First, they noted that sometimes teachers run out of time in class and then assign the content for homework. As a 10th grader stated,

It's really not fair. I mean the teacher was going to teach it and then, because of time, they don't. This doesn't happen a lot at my school, but my friends tell me about it and it would make me mad.

Second, they disliked the expectation that homework was completed within 24 hours. One student said,

I end up missing some of my family things because I have too much homework on one night. I wish that they could let us manage our time a little more. If they gave the homework every few days and then said when it was due then I could make some decisions about when to do it.

Another said,

My graders are a little low because of this. Sometimes I just skip the homework because I already know the information and I have other things to do, like sports or whatever. Like she said, if there was time to manage, I would probably do my homework because I'd like better grades.

This related to the third comment, which was a recommendation that homework not count for much, if any, of the grade. As one student said, "Homework should be practice. You should have to do it if you still don't understand something. Your grade should be on the tests and projects." Another said,

I think homework should only be maybe 10% of the grade, or maybe nothing. My sister told me that her college teachers don't even collect the homework.

They expect you to do it so that you're ready for the test. They do make you write papers, and I think we should do more of that for homework, too.

A third student said,

Some students get better grades than they really deserve, at least according to their level of understanding, because they complete or copy the homework. Some students get worse grades than they really deserve because they blow off the homework. It's just not a good measure of understanding because it's more about compliance.

The Established Purpose

In every classroom we observed, there was a clearly stated learning target and this purpose statement was written on the board. In all but two cases, the purpose focused on what students should learn rather than what they should do. The information was consistently clear and concise. For example, in a history class, the purpose indicated that "today we will learn one cause of World War II" and in an English class the purpose suggested that students would "demonstrate their understanding of at least three persuasive techniques." Given that this was nearly pervasive, we expected that students would comment on this often.

However, in only about half of the interviews did the purpose come up. When it did, the students generally had positive things to say as was the case with one who said,

You always know what you're expected to learn because it's on the wall and the teacher talks about it. When I first walk in the classroom, I always check to see what we're learning and think about if I already know that or not.

Another student commented, "One thing my teachers do is always tell us what we're going to learn. That really helps me because I can then think, like now I'm in math or now I have to think about science."

When we asked more about this during the focus group, several students did not agree that this was useful and, instead, thought that it was a waste of time. A more extreme example came from an 11th grade student who said, "They have this thing where they tell you what you're going to learn every day. I can figure that out on my own and I wish they'd just get to the teaching." Another member of the focus group disagreed, saying,

I don't agree. I think that the purpose can be helpful, especially in the classes that you're not doing so hot in. Like if I pay attention to the purpose in math, I know what the teacher thinks is important and what I should pay attention to. That will probably be on the test.

Guided Instruction

When observing classrooms, we regularly observed teachers meeting with small groups of students. These were different from the times in which we observed teachers move from group to group as students worked collaboratively. In the case of guided instruction, teachers met with small groups for longer periods of time, between 8 and 15 minutes. Often, these students were called over to a teacher work area from their groups. In no case did we see the student who was identified as gifted and talented meeting with the teacher for guided instruction nor did any student offer information about this instructional move during the interviews.

When we asked about this during the focus group session, the students consistently responded that this was to “catch students up” or for the teacher to be able to “re-teach something that students didn’t get the first time.” None of the students in the focus group could remember receiving this type of instruction from their current teachers.

Discussion

The students we observed and interviewed offered some very good advice for teachers who want to ensure that students who are gifted and talented are engaged in high levels of learning. First and foremost, they seemed to endorse the idea of teacher modeling. Consistent with the research on this practice (e.g., Davey, 1983; Wilhelm, 2008) the students in this study appreciated and valued the opportunity to hear their teachers’ thinking as it reaffirmed and extended their own metacognition. It seems reasonable to suggest that middle and high school teachers receive professional development and coaching support to integrate modeling in their classrooms due to the evidence that content literacy strategies are difficult to integrate into secondary classrooms (O’Brien, Stewart, & Moje, 1995). This is also an important finding because some secondary teachers express concern about student motivation and engagement when they are modeling. There are those who worry that modeling is effective for their lower performing students but that their top performing students will be bored (Fisher, Frey, & Lapp, 2011). According to the students in this study, boredom was not an issue; rather, the students found teacher modeling to be interesting and relevant.

In addition, the students in this study provide advice for teachers who are considering, or who are implementing, group work in their classrooms. Overall, most students understood the reasons teachers used group work, they enjoyed working with their peers, and they felt they learned a lot from these experiences. In sum, it seems reasonable to suggest that the students in this study would recommend collaborative or cooperative learning as an important aspect of class time. As Swenson and Strough (2008) note, “Peer collaboration can be a useful tool in a school classroom to help students perform at their best” (p. 715). Interestingly, the Swenson and Strough study demonstrated that both boys’ and girls’ performance on a scientific reasoning task were similar when using collaborative learning and that working with a friend, versus a nonfriend, did not improve students’ success. The students in our study essentially

confirmed this as they commented that they could work with just about anyone in the class and be successful.

The students in this study did, however, recommend that the teacher hold each member of the group accountable for the learning. As Slavin (1996) noted about adolescents in cooperative learning tasks, individual accountability is critical. In his words, "This focuses the activity of the team members on tutoring one another and making sure that everyone on the team is ready for a quiz or other assessment that students will take without teammate help" (p. 201). The students in this study understood, from their lived experiences, what this researcher was recommending before most of them were even born. They wanted to learn with their peers, but they did not want to do the work for their peers.

Their comments about homework were equally enlightening. They recommended that homework focus on things that students understand so they can practice. In addition, they felt that homework be limited to important information and key ideas rather than busywork or classroom instruction that was assigned as homework due to time limitations. They also questioned the value of homework in their overall grades. These students seemed to understand what Vatterott (2011) noted, namely, that "behaviorist solutions such as grades fail to validate the most important purpose of homework—to help students reach their learning goals" (p. 62). Although these students did not offer clear recommendations about homework, there are those who have, including Vatterott (2009) and Cooper (2006).

Interestingly, their comments about a widely recognized and valued instructional component, having a clear learning target, were mixed. Some students appreciated the clear purpose established by their teachers while others did not. The value that students place on the purpose of the lesson may be related to their current level of understanding of, and interest in, the specific content. As well, it may be that some students do not need to be explicitly told what they are going to learn. Having said that, the research evidence for a clear learning target is compelling (e.g., Marzano, 2009) and should probably not be abandoned based on the recommendations of a small sample of students. It is possible that teachers could make the learning target more relevant to the lives of their students so that those who are cynical about it become more interested. As McNulty and Quaglia (2007) so aptly asked, "How can they [students] set and reach academic goals if they don't see the relevance of learning to their lives?" (p. 18). Relevance may be the missing factor for these adolescents who are often very successful in school despite what their teachers do in the classroom.

Finally, we were surprised to find that none of the students who were identified for study were engaged in guided instruction. The teachers we observed seemed very focused on their students and were regularly observed interacting with small groups of students. It may be that the teachers believe that their students who are performing well do not require additional instruction or that they have so many students who need additional instruction that they do not have time to meet with students who are already performing well above grade level. Lack of teacher attention to students who are gifted can increase off-task behavior, irrespective of the difficulty of the task itself (Simonsen,

Little, & Fairbanks, 2010). Students who are gifted, despite their success, deserve teacher time. This time may not be focused on remedial needs but rather serve as an opportunity to delve more deeply into the subject and extend the understanding of all students. Although we understand that the priorities at this time are clearly on students who do not perform well in school, we believe that students who are gifted deserve some guided instruction. We are not suggesting that students who struggle with school be ignored or neglect. There has been progress made in many school systems to address the needs of students who historically would have failed. It is just that allowing gifted students to “get by” as one of the participants noted does not ensure that the needs of all students are being met.

The perspectives of these gifted and talented secondary students offer two recommendations for administrators who are leading school improvement efforts focused on instructional quality. The first is that the practice of guided instruction is as necessary and appropriate for students achieving well above grade level as it is for students who are struggling. Teachers of these students used small group guided instruction as an opportunity for remediation. However, it was not being used as a time to deepen and extend student knowledge beyond grade level expectations. This can unintentionally communicate a message that there is nothing more to be learned about a topic, when nothing could be further from the truth. In professional development and through instructional coaching, the needs of high-achieving students must also be considered. An administrator further reinforces these expectations by attending to and reporting on the opportunities identified high-achieving students receive when conducting classroom observations, learning walks, and individual conferences with teachers.

A second recommendation is that learning targets and subsequent lessons benefit from increased relevance. Relevance is multidimensional and is somewhat specific to the learner, however, as a field we know quite a bit about communicating relevance. These include relating concepts to the experiences of students, which requires that the teacher knows something about them. In addition, relevance can be built through application, such as relating middle school geometric principles to cell phone tower construction and placement (Zbiek, Reed, & Boone, 2007). By extension, curricular organization can raise relevance for students identified as gifted and talented, especially in emphasizing problem-based and project-based learning. These practices provide all students with opportunities to apply knowledge in creative and challenging ways, while working within a team structure. It is worthy of note that the students in this study voiced positive perspectives about working with others, provided there was individual accountability. Most recognize that the ability to work collaboratively to solve problems is relevant to their present and future lives. But they are also eager for their teachers to extend their perspectives beyond the walls of the classroom.

Schools and districts are becoming more sophisticated in their ability to deliver instruction and intervention that reach low-performing students. Evidence of increased graduation rates and a slow but steady improvement in closing the achievement gap are emerging. But “closing the gap” should be more than simply holding the highest

achievers at a constant while trying to elevate those in the lowest quartile. By engaging in instructional practices that reach high achieving students, we may improve outcomes for all students.

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