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Myth 9: There Is a Single Curriculum for the Gifted

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Myths are created and continue to exist because they explain phenomena that are not easily understood or appear to validate ambiguous ideas with ambiguous evidence. Curriculum is an educational phenomenon that continually evokes and sustains a variety of myths such as the belief that prescribed rather than flexibly structured curriculum yields higher outcomes for all students and that a discipline-specific curriculum is easier to teach and learn for all students. Curriculum myths rise and fall based on contemporary educational and societal contexts. Twenty-five years after the first discussion about the myth of a single curriculum for the gifted, the myth is still prevalent. Its viability as a myth is a consequence of the current educational climate rather than empirical evidence that is gathered and used to support it. The reasons that underscore the existence of a single curriculum for the gifted are neither necessarily true for all educators of the gifted nor are they validated in relationship to theories related to curriculum development or design.

The need to promote the concept that there is a single curriculum for the gifted is predicated on a number of issues:

1. The need to support the concept of a single curriculum for the gifted is often equated with a means by which educators can minimize the search for the "best" curriculum for the gifted. In many cases, there is insufficient evidence to discern from the differentiated curriculum produced by educational and commercial enterprises that there is a single curriculum most appropriately matched to student, teacher, and programmatic needs.
2. It is believed by some educators that the need to provide professional development to teachers can be maximized by identifying a single curriculum for the gifted. Focusing on a single

curriculum labeled for the gifted allows professional development providers to target their training and eliminate the presentation of a field of alternatives representative of many curricula for the gifted that often results in diffusing rather than enhancing the teachers' attainment of competencies designated as appropriate for educators of the gifted.

3. The need for advocacy efforts to develop and/or sustain services for the gifted is often dependent on the ability to argue with clarity to convince or persuade a vote or garner support from parents, administrators, or broad members. The art of argumentation is often enhanced by an orientation that is targeted on a single exemplar. The promotion of a single curriculum for the gifted can more easily provide a target that is defined and exemplified and, thus, more easily facilitates positive advocacy endeavors.
4. The need for performance data that verify the outcomes of gifted students as a consequence of learning in a differentiated curriculum is more easily quantified across a program within a classroom, school, district, or state when emphasis has been placed on a single curriculum for the gifted. The concentrated attention on a single curriculum for the gifted also fosters accountability and data-driven decision making that can be referenced easily and accommodates clearly areas of teaching and learning needs.

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Just as there are reasons to support a myth, there are reasons to dispel or correct the meaning of the myth:

1. There is a body of knowledge in the form of principles or elements that designate the features appropriate to the design and implementation of a differentiated curriculum for the gifted. They signify the nonnegotiable tenets of a differentiated curriculum. When applied across the plethora of differentiated curriculum for the gifted, it is noted that no one curriculum has the sole priority of these elements. Therefore, there is not a single curriculum for the gifted.
2. The recognition of the linguistic, academic, cultural, and economic diversities among gifted students negates the fact that there is a single curriculum responsive to the needs illustrative of these students. All the discussions regarding the importance of culturally responsive curriculum negate the concept that there could be a single curriculum for the gifted.
3. The emphasis on a continuum of services to provide varied accommodations to serve the differences among the gifted demands curriculum that is also responsive to the prototype of the services. An afterschool program emphasizing leadership skills and a program that is emphasizing the arts require curriculum elements and structures that correspond to the particular service. Recognition of this factor negates that there is a single curriculum for the gifted.

Although it could be stated that there is no single curriculum for the gifted, there is sufficient evidence to acknowledge that there is a single set of principles or elements that represent an appropriate differentiated curriculum for gifted students. These principles or elements can be applied to myriad models to construct curriculum. The different models used to formulate the curriculum regulate and shift the emphasis among the principles or elements that differentiate the curriculum. The emphasis given to the set of principles or elements within a model does not suggest that there is only a single way by which to create

curriculum for the gifted. It does imply that there are multiple ways to configure a differentiated curriculum for the gifted applying the single set of principles or elements that constitute differentiation.

The stress on prescriptive curriculum, pacing charts, and standardized testing has strengthened the case for developing a single curriculum for the gifted. There are educational and fiscal cost benefits for such a movement as noted in the suggestions made by some states for a national curriculum. Concerns for equity and access also reinforce the obligation perceived by some educators to construct a single curriculum for students, and many of these educators even promote a single curriculum for the gifted based on the same ideology. It is imperative to realize the multiple interpretations that a single curriculum would have for the gifted or any of our learners. How can we promote social justice and the uniqueness of the individual while simultaneously advocating for a single curriculum?

The "great curriculum debate" educators of the gifted should be arguing relates to the following question: In what ways does the differentiated curriculum designed or chosen for our gifted students respond to their needs, interests, and abilities? Answers to this question assist educators of the gifted to recognize that the shift from the general basic or regular curriculum developed for all students to a differentiated curriculum for the gifted is only a partial step in the pathway to align curriculum to giftedness. The next step in the curriculum pathway is to individualize the differentiated curriculum reactive to the entire population of gifted students to become responsive to each gifted student. When educators of the gifted truly individualize the differentiated curriculum, they can say, "There is a single curriculum for A gifted student."

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