Teaching for
High Potential
QUALITY CLASSROOM PRACTICE FOR HIGH-ABILITY STUDENTS

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BRIDGING THE DIVIDE

Demythologizing Gifted Education: A 25-Year Journey

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In the 1970s, I had the opportunity to make a presentation to the (then much smaller) NAGC Conference. In preparation for that presentation, I had made slides (no PowerPoint in those days) of teachers and students in classrooms from the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s. Presenting the slides in a random sequence, I challenged the audience to identify which decade each photo represented. The audience was feeling very proud because most people were able to place most of the photos in the correct decade. However, my next question deflated their self-satisfaction and revealed my true concern: I asked how they were able to make their decisions. Their placements were based on a variety of factors that had nothing at all to do with teaching and learning; they relied dependably on such factors as hair styles and the clothing styles of both teachers and students. Little about the pictures revealed differences in the classroom's physical environment or other factors that might suggest differences related to teaching and learning. A quote I had located impishly suggested that "there is no national museum of education—because we are still using it all." You might believe that this activity would not be effective today, and although I haven't tried it, I suspect you might be correct. Let us not be too quick to congratulate ourselves, however. This anecdote may be a helpful backdrop, providing some context for the new issue of *Gifted Child Quarterly*.

> "All 15 of the 1982 myths remain with us today, although some have been modified in form or content over time."

We need to set the stage with just a little more history. The Winter 1982 issue of *GCQ* (Volume 26, Number 1) focused specifically on the challenge of "Demythologizing Gifted Education," centering on the question, "What are the main issues that gifted education must confront effectively if it is to survive the 1980s?" The issue arose from the perception that, more than a decade after the release of the widely discussed Marland report, many common myths ("practices or beliefs which we often discover upon close scrutiny to be more fanciful than truthful") were persistently prevalent in gifted education. The three general goals and purposes for the issue were to: stimulate some lively discussion, critical thinking, and creative research; shake loose the grip of some common myths; and suggest promising directions for more productive foundations for inquiry and practice.

In the context of 25 years of extensive and accelerating complexity and change, we began in 2008 to reexamine the 1982 myths, assessing the extent to which they may still exist, have been resolved, or have been replaced by new concerns. We learned that all 15 of the 1982 myths remain with us today, although some have been modified in form or content over time. In addition, several new myths emerged, resulting in a total of 19 myths addressed in the fall 2009 issue of *GCQ*.

The goal of providing appropriate and challenging educational programming—a goal gifted education specialists share with all concerned educators—must take into account these stubbornly persistent myths. Especially in times when the agendas of many educational policy makers seem focused on other priorities, we need to be advocates for quality education that recognizes and nurtures students' strengths and talents. In order to play that advocacy role effectively on the broader educational "stage," however, it is incumbent on us to be aware of the internal obstacles as well as the external

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Louis Teacher of Distinction. This dedication reflects in student accomplishment. Kathi Harshman, a math and drama teacher states, "Churchill students are not only involved in achieving academic success, but also discovering areas of strength that they never knew they had."

At New City School, teachers identify student talents through multiple intelligences and then tailor curriculum to their talent. "The emphasis on multiple intelligences allows students to understand themselves and their peers in a sense that is broader than the traditional linguistic and mathematical skill set," a parent stated. Teacher Christine Wallach says, "The students learn how to solve problems within the classroom and within the school. At New City, the learning is experiential and leads the students to understand who they are as members of society and as individual learners."

New City recognizes different talents students have, giving them a chance to develop their talent to its full potential. One parent commented, "The focus on diversity, the development of the emotional intelligence of the child, and the emphasis on creating a robust foundation for learning and growth are key components of the educational program at New City."

Churchill and New City redefine what it means to be a gifted student. Leaders like the ones found in the halls of these schools are the true MythBusters our students need. ■

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threats, and to invest our time, energy, and efforts in strengthening practices that will finally lay these myths to rest. We might argue that effective advocacy to others will be enhanced by our ability to demonstrate that our own efforts and actions reflect the best available knowledge and practice for students.

The broad areas represented in the 19 myths addressed in the Fall 2009 issue of *GCQ* span the core themes and topics that frame effective practice as well as an agenda for advocacy: a contemporary, inclusive view of the nature and definition of "gifts and talents," a commitment to identification practices that reflect purposeful efforts to understand students' strengths and educational needs, and programming that responds to the strengths, talents, and sustained interests of our students in diverse and varied ways. As practitioners (in the school setting, in teacher education and research, or as advocates for program support), awareness of these myths, and a renewed commitment to putting them behind us, can create a foundation not only for survival in difficult times, but also for constructive progress that will benefit educators, parents, and students everywhere. ■