Meeting the Needs of Gifted Learners: A Montessori Perspective

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Abstract

This paper reviews the characteristics presented by gifted children and adolescents. It discusses the special programs and academic models that have been created on their behalf and suggests benefit from a Montessori-based program. Research appraises the actual situation of gifted learners in Mexico, and in particular, the gifted adolescents at Montessori Sierra Madre (MSM), while analyzing the importance of teacher training and educational aims.

Background

In general, gifted children are defined as having asynchronous intellectual development that enables them to learn faster and at a deeper level than their age peers.

Specialized authors like Gallagher (1964, 1975), Renzulli (1977) and Sisk (1997), define a gifted person as someone who shows, or could show exceptional level of performance in one of the following areas: general intellectual ability, specific academic aptitude, creative thinking, leadership ability, and visual or performing arts.

In the last fifty years, many organizations, programs and structures have been created for the gifted. These include: enrichment, acceleration, cluster grouping, resource rooms, and mentorships.

Even though there is an extended belief on the benefit a Montessori program can bring to a gifted learner, little research, like Kendrick C.M. (2000) has been done on this subject.

Questions

- How does a Montessori environment address the particular needs of gifted and talented learners?
- How can Mexican gifted adolescents benefit from a Montessori program?

Research Methods

For this research, deviation from fixed study guides and programs was allowed. Differentiation and enrichment techniques provided students an opportunity to choose the topics they would study, the depth they wanted to achieve, and the way in which they would show mastery on the topic; minimum requirement was specified to meet these topic goals. Working at MSM during the project allowed time and space for multiple interactions and observations.

Six adolescents attending MSM participated in this study:

5 male and 1 female with an age range between 14 and 15 years. Students were chosen not because of previous outstanding academic results, but solely because they had been previously identified as gifted by scoring >130 points on a WISC-IV standardized IQ test.

Students were interviewed once a month, for a period of six months, regarding how they felt about having (or not) differentiated instruction, choosing their personal study topics and negotiating assessment methods. They were also questioned about activities they felt could be useful for their future development. All interviews (5 per participant) were recorded and transcribed. Direct observation of the participants took place twice a week.

A written questionnaire was provided at the end of the school year to help clarify the experience each student had while in this study.

Parents of participating gifted adolescents were addressed concerning motivation, commitment, and attitude changes perceived in their children during the study.

Two AMS - certified teachers were interviewed regarding the relationship they developed with the gifted students throughout a school year; difficulties they faced and achievements they had.

Findings

All students considered advantages to choosing the topics they would work on. While for some (2/6) it was beneficial because it would help them explore their capabilities without limits, for others (4/6) it meant they would not be doing tedious work they disliked, and they would have the opportunity to work with more interesting things.

The main problem students faced (5/6) was choosing their research topic. This may be due to the fact that they tended to like too many things at the same time or just because they felt insecure about choosing.

Students felt the relationship with the teacher had somehow changed. Some (4/6) felt there were higher expectations on them, while some others felt "closer" to the teacher.

Because of advanced academic skills, both teachers relate that it is very easy to forget the students' real age and demand a maturity not yet reached.



Both teachers believed they could benefit students by helping them develop positive habits such as respect, tolerance and resilience, which would have greater impact on their lives in the long run. These habits can be fostered through community building activities, service learning activities, and field trips, which are common elements of a Montessori middle school classroom.

All students (6/6) perceived the experience as positive because they felt an increased motivation towards completing their tasks while some (4/6) showed a general improvement in attitude. This appears to match theories that deal with the effect of choice in learning.

Implications for Montessori Practices

Pairing gifted learners with older peers, provides an appropriate arrangement that could be beneficial, especially in a Montessori classroom.

Early research skills may help children become independent learners and may provide tools to answer never-ending questions, easing the burden on adults who try to respond.

The knowledge from specialists or mentors for a variety of subjects in the classroom, combined with time to research and learn are situations that may fully benefit students.

Since gifted students can sometimes show an exalted sensitivity and difficulty in expressing their feelings due to asynchronous development, special attention should be put forth to help them thrive in these areas while minimizing stress and fostering the lifelong learner inside each.

Teacher training in identifying and helping gifted learners fully develop their skills as whole human beings is greatly needed. Cooperation and communication between teachers and parents of gifted learners is a must.

Limitations

Since the number of gifted students is not abundant, only six students were included in the research.

The study focuses mainly on Montessori middle school students in an environment where fixed study guides are commonly used.

Further Steps

A longitudinal study for the students involved in differentiation and enrichment practices while in their high school years could be beneficial.

Further observations on gifted learners in early childhood and elementary school level are needed.

A statistical study on gifted students in Montessori environments could reinforce the findings.

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Acknowledgements

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