The Role of the Gifted Coordinator in Serving Visual-Spatial Learners

Penny Choice

Public school education is at a crossroads. Educators all over the country are involved in school reform as they attempt to meet the educational needs of an ever-growing, diverse group of students. Staff development is an ongoing ingredient in preparation of teachers and administrators as they deal with educational initiatives, re-certification and other statewide requirements. As staff development coordinator for a Midwest Regional Office of Education, I provide training for coordinators of Gifted Education and teachers in 45 school districts and over 150 schools. It is my responsibility to see that educators are aware of best practices in the field of education. Understanding the needs of the visual-spatial learner (VSL) is essential if teachers are going to provide high-quality learning experiences for all the students in their classrooms.

Identification

Gifted students are identified through a variety of measures. In many states, the law requires the use of both objective and subjective measures in the identification process. For decades, standardized achievement tests have been most often used as the objective measure (Gillespie, 1982). Teacher checklists are usually used as a subjective measure. In a study of 100 urban school districts, Dr. Wilma Gillespie (1982) found that achievement scores, teacher recommendations and grades were the three most prevalent criteria employed in selecting students for gifted programs. All three of these criteria are effective for identifying the gifted auditory-sequential learner.

But what can we do about appropriate identification of the gifted visual-spatial learner for gifted programs? And what if the student has significant auditory weaknesses? Gifted students have an amazing capacity to "mask" auditory deficiencies (Silverman, 1989), and, therefore, can remain unnoticed in their struggles with the auditory world of education. So the gifted and highly visual-spatial child often develops compensation strategies to deal with the world of the auditory-sequential classroom. Frequently, compensation helps them "get by" in the regular classroom; however, auditory weaknesses significantly lower IQ scores and prevent children from qualifying for needed gifted services (Silverman, 2000). It is important for gifted program coordinators to be alert to this possibility. They can then provide teachers with appropriate strategies so that VSL students can function effectively in the classroom and receive gifted education services.

An example of masked auditory deficiencies can be found in a story from my own experience. When I got to college, I found that most of the undergrad courses were delivered in an auditory-sequential fashion (lecture style). I realized I had a problem: I was having trouble passing tests. It seemed I was not hearing what the professor/lecturer was saying accurately. My notes looked good, but I was missing significant information. To survive in school, I had to come up with a solution. After much trial and tribulation, I

ended up taping the lectures and going over and over them with my notes. Much to my surprise, I realized that I was missing important information delivered in the lecture hall. No wonder I was having difficulty in exams! This compensation strategy served me well through several advanced degrees. Coordinators need to be aware of hidden weaknesses, and should prepare educators and VSL students who may require compensation strategies, such as tape recording lectures, to be successful.

The *Visual-Spatial Identifier* can assist G/T teachers in identifying gifted visual-spatial learners; it is also useful for nongifted students, so it is applicable to the general classroom. This 15-item questionnaire takes only minutes to complete, and is quite reliable. Currently, the *Identifier* is available for students in fourth through sixth grade. For more information, see "Classroom Identification of Visual-Spatial Learners," by Steve Haas, in this issue.

Differentiation

Differentiation of instruction is currently an important educational initiative throughout the United States. Understanding and providing for the visual-spatial learner is a logical addition to any inservice on differentiation. Coordinators who are conducting staff development on differentiation can use this opportunity to explore the needs of the VSL. Many states sponsor workshops, such as the state of Illinois' Gifted Institute, which is a 50-hour workshop on the gifted child, taught through the Regional Office of Education. States that offer such workshops promote differentiation for the gifted child (as well as for other students in the classroom) and also provide a strong focus on the social-emotional needs of the gifted. Strategies for the VSL student should be stressed in both of these areas. These strategies can be found in several of the articles in this issue of the *Gifted Education Communicator* and in *Upside-Down Brilliance: The Visual-Spatial Learner* (Silverman, 2002).

I am in a variety of school districts in our county on a daily basis. As I work with teachers, administrators, and parents, I am constantly reminding them of the different learning needs of students. Educators learn that one size does ***not*** fit all – that students have learning preferences, which help them create an effective pattern of growth for themselves. When students, teachers and parents understand students' preferences for learning, and teachers provide for these preferences, the classroom can be an exciting place.

When providing staff development for teachers, I follow the guidelines of Carol Ann Tomlinson (1999), author of *The Differentiated Classroom: Responding to the Needs of All Learners.* In the Summer Institute for Academic Diversity, taught every July at the University of Virginia, Carol suggests a plan for focus and growth that includes: *reflecting on students' needs; looking at instructional approaches; building classroom flexibility and community; building quality curriculum; working with differentiation/gifted education/special education specialists;* and *working with parents.*

Within this context, I explore the world of the visual-spatial learner in the following manner:

1. *Reflecting on students' needs.* Here we ask teachers to focus on the differences between the visual-spatial preference for learning and the auditory-sequential preference for learning. Auditory learners do well with oral directions, but VSLs need to see directions visually and to be encouraged to picture concepts. It is important to observe students to see how they learn best. And it is just as important to get actual input from them.

2. *Looking at instructional approaches*. Teachers are encouraged to examine products, assessments, materials and presentation modes that meet the needs of the visual-spatial learner. VSLs need visual instruction and hands-on learning experiences. In assessing their progress, visual-spatial students can be asked to produce visual products (a series of photographs, dioramas, artistic representations, videotapes, a PowerPoint slide presentation, etc.) rather than written work. They are rarely able to fully demonstrate their knowledge in written assignments. If a written assignment is essential, their ideas should be graded separately from their grammar, syntax, punctuation, capitalization, and spelling. Students with auditory deficiencies will need to be taught compensation strategies to assist their individual growth.

3. *Building classroom flexibility and community.* Flexibility is the key to teaching gifted students, with their wide range of interests and varying skill levels in different areas. It is also essential to understanding and meeting the needs of the visual-spatial learner. Neither group is comfortable in an auditory-sequential classroom. Gifted VSLs feel even greater frustration as they are dealing with two sets of differences. It requires extra effort on the part of the teacher to build an appropriate classroom climate. Teachers who accept individual differences, and model their appreciation of unique learners, set a tone that is contagious. Students can also be taught about their learning styles and the value of diversity. They can learn firsthand how different learning styles can support each other, as when a writer and an illustrator work together to create a book.

4. *Building quality curriculum*. When curriculum is rich and taught through concepts and big ideas, the whole-to-part visual-spatial learner is provided with the global approach needed for significant learning. Curriculum that is text-based or skills-based is set up for the sequential learner. Teaching from essential questions and enduring understandings provides the whole-to-part approach that grabs and challenges gifted students, and is particularly engaging for the VSL.

5. *Working with differentiation/gifted education/special education specialists*. Many visual-spatial learners are twice exceptional: both gifted and learning disabled. Some have central auditory processing disorder. Some are dyslexic.

Some have sensory integration dysfunction, which leads to difficulties with handwriting (known as dysgraphia). Some have AD/HD. There are also many VSLs who have no disabilities. However, for those who are twice exceptional, the coordinated services of gifted education and special education are essential. For differentiation to be effective, VSLs must be able to develop their gifts as fully as possible, and to remediate, or compensate for, any disabilities that may be present. This requires regular communication with specialists in gifted education and special education.

6. *Working with parents.* Visual-spatial learners are a challenge to raise, since they march to a different drummer. Parents need assistance in getting their VSL children to be more organized, to record homework assignments, to complete assignments, and to turn in completed assignments. They may be trying to teach their children at home using auditory-sequential methods, similar to those that were used when they were growing up. These usually fail. Parent workshops on living with VSLs can help parents understand their children. They can learn to show VSLs, rather than tell them. Daily planners, home/school communication, two sets of books for home and school, can ease family friction, as well as increasing productivity in students.

Professional development

Professional development can take several different roads. Some of the opportunities that can be provided include:

- Lesson planning and analysis with teachers
- State training inservice for Gifted Education
- Participate in school improvement teams and study groups
- Encourage action research and other research studies
- Coaching
- Book discussion of *Upside-Down Brilliance: The Visual-Spatial Learner*
- Model lessons using differentiation and other strategies appropriate for the VSL
- Help develop curriculum on an ongoing basis with teachers and administrators
- Present workshops on the Visual-Spatial Learner
- Present at conferences
- Current best practice information on the Visual-Spatial Learner

One G/T Intervention Specialist, Kathy Beatty, has set up a coaching group for nine gifted visual-spatial sixth graders in Hilliard City School District in Ohio. Kathy teaches them about their learning style, using some of the activities outlined in *Upside-Down Brilliance.* These students are discovering that they aren't alone, they're learning how to support each other, and they're developing strategies for success in the classroom. In a sense, they are sharpening both edges

of their mental swords. They discuss and practice ways to tap into their visual-spatial strengths to enhance learning, and they are also finding ways to shore up or work around their sequential weaknesses, especially related to organization and writing.

When we teach coordinators, teachers, and administrators about the VSL child, and when we provide strategies that meet the needs of these learners, we commit to excellence in education for the twenty-first century. In this fast-paced society, it's hard to imagine the world that our children will live in years from now. We know that it will be more dependent on technology, and we know that VSLs are often naturally drawn to technology. If we provide appropriate learning opportunities for all students, including the visual-spatial learner, we can be assured that we are giving them the best education to meet their needs.

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Penny Choice, M.A., M.Ed., is Coordinator for Gifted Education and Fine Arts for Lake County Educational Services Division of the Regional Office of Education, Grayslake, IL. She has a Bachelor's Degree in Speech and Drama, a M.Ed. in Gifted Education and an M.A. in Educational Administration. Penny's areas of expertise include curriculum development, staff development, gifted education, social science, problem-based learning, and fine arts education with a focus in integrating the arts and the use of process drama, a classroom instructional tool.