

RESPONSE

The Difference Is What Makes Differentiation

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Van Tassel-Baska has pointed out several important considerations that should guide decision making about the type of administrative model a school might select. Foremost among these considerations is her argument that "local educators must plan a program before they identify students or select a grouping strategy . . ." Although I agree wholeheartedly with this truism, it behooves me to question her conclusion that ". . . when such planning does occur, rarely do school districts opt for the pull-out administrative arrangement . . ." This statement is simply not true! The Pull-out Model is the overwhelming choice at the elementary level, and I know from experience that such a large number of programs exist *because of a good deal of careful planning*.

Similarly, Van Tassel-Baska reports that the Cox, Daniels, and Boston study "depicts the ineffectiveness [of pull-out programs] as an approach to servicing the gifted." This statement is also untrue. Cox, Daniels, and Boston did not study program effectiveness! Their questionnaire study gathered actuarial data about the numbers of students enrolled in various types of programs, time allotments, staffing patterns, etc. It gathered no data on student performance of any kind, nor did it examine regular classroom modifications that are used in conjunction with pull-out program experiences for high ability students. How Cox, Daniels, and Boston reached their generally negative conclusion about pull-out programs (pp. 42-44) is beyond my understanding, and I might add, well beyond reasonable justification when one examines the types of actuarial data gathered in their study.

Although it would be tempting to argue with Van Tassel-Baska's conclusions about ability grouping, the point seems to be moot, because most pull-out programs include a population of high ability

students. Many pull-out programs use cluster grouping within language arts and mathematics to meet the needs of these bright youngsters *in addition* to the time spent in a resource room setting. Even though many pull-out programs provide the ability grouping that Van Tassel-Baska advocates, I must question her assertion and ask to see the evidence that "the more [gifted students] are grouped in terms of contact time, the more their unique educational needs are met." *Uniqueness* seems to me to be a term that more logically equates with our efforts to provide flexible, individualized programming rather than with grouping patterns. In addition to grouping by ability to meet subject area strengths, pull-out programs have the added advantage of providing an opportunity for the more flexible grouping of high ability students according to both interests and learning styles. This advantage, and my concern for program flexibility, are the basis for the academic freedom argument set forth in my paper.

With the exception of these concerns, the best rejoinder that I can offer to Van Tassel-Baska's points is that the strength of the pull-out model is exactly what she criticizes. I like the fact that "gifted program planners [can] predetermine the direction of their program . . ." I am pleased that "the appropriateness of [students'] experience varies greatly . . ." and that we are not burdened with "pre-planned scope and sequence work" that so characterizes the regular curriculum. If we have the opportunity to do something different (and differentiation seems to be our ideal, if not our elusive goal), then why try to recreate in special programs the behemoth and the straight jacket that reflects the preplanned scope and sequence of regular education? This type of education is precisely what has failed our most able learners in the past. Instead of copying traditional models, we should be trying to influence general education by providing examples of the many ways bright students can be served. These services should not be limited to a resource room component or an ability grouped special class, but rather we should focus on the many different options that can be provided through the efforts of a total school faculty to meet the needs of our brightest youngsters.