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The Use of Poetry in Exploring the Concepts of Difference and Diversity for Gifted/Talented Students

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The author addresses the issues of difference and diversity, and their effect on gifted and talented (G/T) students. The characteristics of G/T students are listed and analyzed, with a resultant understanding of the many ways in which these students may be different from their peers. The listed characteristics also show how G/T students are able to excel in the writing and understanding of poetry. Techniques for the writing of poetry to further understand their own difference and diversity are listed, as well as specific poetry to be read about the subject. The author is a social worker, poet, former elementary teacher, and the parent of G/T children.

Teachers of gifted/talented (G/T) students have known for a long time that poetry is a very special medium with their students. Many G/T students write poetry on their own, and those who are assigned to write it are often astounded with their results. Those of us who are familiar with poetry therapy know how poetry can bring out inner knowledge that was previously hidden from our psyche. This article addresses the concept of "difference." G/T students are, after all, "special education" students. They know they are different from most of their peers. "Diversity" is a concept which is being addressed in almost all areas of life, but it is here integrated with the idea that G/T students have to deal with their own differences as well as those of others.

According to Robinson and Olszewski-Kubilius (1996, p. 428) there are 16 characteristics of G/T children. Several of those characteristics combine to determine the child's "differentness," such as "synchrony across developmental domains," "conversation and interests of older children,"

"insatiable curiosity and perceptive questions," "sensitivity and perfectionism," and "intensity of feeling and emotion." These characteristics are seen in elementary-aged children as well as gifted adults, all of whom eventually come to terms with the many ways in which they are different from their peers.

Other G/T characteristics, listed by Robinson and Olszewski-Kubilius, explain why G/T students respond well to poetry. They exhibit "advanced language and reasoning skills," and "a rapid and intuitive understanding of concepts." What better characteristics for poets than those just listed? They have "an impressive long term memory." If they won't let old thoughts go—then let them write about them! They have the "ability to hold problems in mind that are not yet figured out." When a poet starts a poem, he/she never knows where it is going to end, and it may not offer a solution, just a new thought. The next characteristic of a G/T student is almost the definition of a poet, that is: the G/T student "has the ability to make connections between one concept and another." G/T students also have "an interest in patterns and relationships." No wonder they love rhyme, rhythm, and all the other characteristics of poem-making. They also state that G/T students find "pleasure in posing and solving new problems." Poetry-making is often just that. They have the "capacity for independent, self-directed activities." A poem is always personal, written from solitude. They are "sensitive" and have an "intensity of feeling and emotion." And lastly, they are described as having "perfectionism." I like to tell teachers that they can allow their G/T students to edit, edit, edit.

A poetry technique which can be used with any age group is the *acrostic*. Start by having the student write an acrostic with his/her name, describing what is unique and what might be different from others. Then later, when discussing difference, ask the students to write an acrostic using the name of a person very different from themselves, possibly an ethnic name, and describe that person in

a positive way.

A second technique (Koch, 1970) which may be helpful is asking the student to write / *used to be* ... *but now I am* ... in which the writer chooses an object in nature to describe himself/herself as a younger person, and as one who has changed. This technique could be used at the end of a unit on diversity, describing how the student's mind has opened to new concepts and understandings of diverse cultures.

One of my favorite techniques is the *conversation poem*. I enjoy reading students Ntosake Shange's poem "Ancestral Messengers" (1987, p. 14). In the poem an authority figure is speaking to Senora Rodriguez, telling her that she cannot bring her goat up to the 13th floor of the project building, and she has to get rid of the chickens too. This is the story of people from a rural culture trying to live in a big city, and the poet tells it through conversation. It ends with the line, "It's just that living creatures are not welcome here." Ask the students to write about a clash of cultures using a conversation poem between two people.

When students begin to think about the consequences of difference, they often mention violence. The use of *personification* is a good technique in which to discuss violence. Eugene Field's (1956) poem "The Duel" addresses this issue directly. Who is the winner when no one compromises or understands? Ask the students to personify something non-human and write about human differences and/or consequences.

The *prose poem* is a form which I find is underutilized in the schools. I also find that students love to write in this form once they understand the concept. The poem "Lil" (Gustavson, 1995) is a prose

poem about a stinky old lady who is avoided by children and adults alike. Ask the students to write a prose poem about someone in their community who is misunderstood, or someone they don't like because they are very different, or someone of another race, culture, or age, and include in that poem something of the feelings of the other person.

Haiku is a poetry form which has become very popular. Many students have become proficient at writing haiku, and they enjoy it. Carlos Colon, in his book "Clocking Out" (1996) has written this haiku:

taking my glasses
the optician disappears into
the wallpaper, (p. 50)

This poem could start a discussion about what it means to be handicapped. What is it like to be blind, hearing-impaired, mentally retarded, have a learning disability, have ADHD? What would it be like to be average? Is it a handicap to be gifted? What is the difference between a disability and a handicap? Have them write a haiku about this discussion. Another poem which deals with this topic is Denise Levertov's (1968) "A Solitude." It begins:

A blind man. I can stare at him
ashamed, shameless: Or does he know it?
No, he is in a great solitude, (p. 75)

Alice Walker (1991) has a great *advice-giving* poem. "Without Commercials" is an editorial about how we ought to live. She tells us to stop tanning our skin if we are white, stop bleaching it if we are black, stop trimming our noses, stop unfolding our eyes.

For we are all *splendid* descendants
of Wilderness, Eden:
needing only to see each other

without

commercials

to believe, (p. 379)

Ask the students to write an advice-giving poem at the end of the unit, summarizing what they have learned about diversity and difference.

A *who-am-I* poem is also a very important part of this unit. Sometimes G/T students know they are different, but in fact think they are superior to everyone else, and let them all know it. That is the case in Jack Prelutsky's (1987) poem "I'm The Single Most Wonderful Person I Know." He ends his poem, after listing his wonderful talents, with these lines:

there's only one thing that I can't understand— why nobody likes me ...
not ever! (p.137)

Discuss the difference between self-esteem and arrogance. Ask them to write a who-am-I poem, listing both good and not-so-good characteristics. I have written a poem for preschoolers that is about the same issue. The HeadStart and kindergarten children, to whom I have read this poem, all recognize this character.

JEALOUS

Did you ever know a person who could do 'most anything
like wigglin' his ears
or reelin' a yo-yo string?
He's nice to everybody
and your mama likes him too
'cause he knows the polite talk
such as "Ma'am, how do you do?"
The teacher says he's smart
and my sister says he's cute! Then tell me why I always feel
like giving him the BOOT!?

This poem comes from the perspective of the normal child, who has to compete with gifted children, sometimes in his/her own family. Ask the student to write a poem from a sibling's perspective.

A fun technique to try is writing a *poem with a foreign word* in it. Shel Silverstein (1981) has a wonderful poem called "Deaf Donald," which incorporates sign language. Begin a discussion about foreign languages. Is someone strange because they speak a foreign language, or speak English with an accent? How many in the class know a foreign language? How many know sign language?

After they have written the poem, have them read it aloud to the class. Make sure the foreign word is pronounced correctly.

Former president Jimmy Carter (1995) wrote a poem called "With Words We Learn To Hate." Read this poem aloud and discuss the origins of hatred and intolerance. Can words we use teach us other things? *Suggest the line* "With words we learn to celebrate ..." and have them finish the poem.

In her poem "the thirty-eighth year" Lucille Clifton (Z987) uses the technique of the *repeating line* to get her point across. In this extraordinary poem she states:

I had expected more than this. I had not expected to be an
ordinary woman, (p. 158)

Ask the students to write a poem repeating the phrase "ordinary boy/girl" or "extraordinary boy/girl" or both. What do your students expect from life? How is their life the same or different from that of Lucille Clifton.

Other poems about diversity and difference are: "Tecumseh" and "Learning About The Indians" by Mary Oliver (1992), and "The Long-Haired Boy" by Shel Silverstein (1974). "To Roxanne" (Gustavson, 1995) is about sibling rivalry between G/T sisters.

This is an important issue for gifted and talented students. The use of poetry reading and writing can facilitate self-understanding, as well as understanding of all the diversity issues of age, sex, culture, religion, class and intelligence level. I have presented examples of poetry for all ages of student, as well as techniques that teachers may use to encourage the writing of poetry. Therapists may also use these techniques with individual G/T clients. Remember to use humor as well. The last of the characteristics of gifted children, as described by Robinson and Olszewski-Kubilius (1996), is an "advanced sense of humor for age."

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