Implementing the Levels of Service (LoS) Approach: Level III—Services for Some Students

This document describes one of the four principal components of the Levels of Service (LoS) approach to talent development. “Talent development” and “programming for talent development” refer to efficient ways of summarizing the full message: “all of the efforts made—at home, in a classroom, in a school, in a school district, and in a community—to recognize, nurture, and celebrate the many and varied strengths, talents, and sustained interests of all students.” The LoS approach involves four interrelated levels, each of which is a unique way of differentiating instruction and programming activities in response to students’ personal characteristics.

Level III Case Study

This case study illustrates the implementation of Level III programming services, and specifically, explores how a teacher used the LoS approach to address and manage the talent development needs of some students who have demonstrated strengths that are often met outside of the regular classroom. Level III services focus on in-depth studies that provide a high degree of challenge for the some students who are ready for and motivated by such experiences. Fewer students are typically involved in Level III services than in Level II (broadly invitational for many students) or Level I (intended for all students). Level III opportunities are based on documented talents, competencies, interests, and abilities, typically analyzed using a profile of individual strengths, interests, personal characteristics, and learning background that assists in determining for whom participation in a certain Level III activity is appropriate. These services extend beyond the general curriculum and often extend beyond the school day and the school building. They may involve regularly scheduled small group or individual activities.

Mr. Swanson: Principal of East Happy Valley Elementary

I am Gerald Swanson, and I am beginning my third year as principal at East Happy Valley Elementary School (EHVE). Although part of a school district that includes urban and suburban settings, EHVE is a rural school that serves 400 students enrolled in grades K through 5. EHVE has a population that is roughly one-third rural children, one-third children who live in an upscale subdivision, and one-third Latino children whose parents work in a meatpacking plant that was constructed within the last five years. A wide range of student performance exists. Although the parents from the subdivision are the most aggressive in demanding services for their children, I immediately noticed that a number of very capable and talented children come from all three areas.

When I first came to EHVE, I found that the school had focused upon a very “back-to-basics” approach, with very few enrichment opportunities for any student, and no gifted or talented program in recent memory. Recognizing obvious inadequacies in this approach, I met with a variety of stakeholders to elicit their views regarding the direction in which they wanted EHVE to head. To that end, I met with students,
teachers, parents, and local community members to discuss how we should proceed as a school. Students, parents, teachers, and community members all wanted increased opportunities for the children we serve, and indicated they were willing to work together to achieve this goal. Based on some comments from our district’s superintendent and gifted and talented coordinator about offering more diverse and challenging program options, the stakeholders and I decided to implement a Levels of Service (LoS) approach at our school.

A year after implementing the LoS approach, I am generally pleased with the progress teachers and staff have made with the program. After reflecting on the year’s progress, I asked my teachers during an in-service day to assess the progress made to date. To answer this question, the teachers met as members of grade level teams to assess the work that has been accomplished. All of the teachers now feel comfortable with Level I activities, and through collaboration many feel that quality Level II services are being provided to students, such as weekly two-hour mini-courses that have allowed many students to engage in deeper explorations of special interests or previous experiences. Questions continue, however, with regard to Level III services. When I followed up our in-service day findings with an anonymous needs assessment, many teachers confessed to being uncomfortable attempting to provide Level III services. I asked the teachers to brainstorm ways of better understanding Level III activities and then how to make those services available to children. We decided to focus our efforts on two of the four keys to success in implementing Level III programming described in the books Enhancing and Expanding Gifted Programs (2004) and the Talent Development Planning Handbook (2008).

For Key 2: Move forward to design opportunities that link explicitly to students’ needs, and communicate expectations to students, we recognized the need for professional development concerning differentiating the curriculum so we can respond to students’ strengths and talents, with an emphasis on promoting understanding and in-depth studies. For Key 3: Deliver differentiated services that respond to the students’ unique personal strengths and talents through individual or group experiences, we created curriculum enhancement teams comprised of representatives from the home, school, and community to stimulate motivation and explore creative ways to locate and link resources including people, places, and things with student needs.

**Level III Activity: Brainstorming**

Within the LoS model, Level III programming seeks to provide services to that smaller group of children who will benefit from a high degree of challenge within a specific talent domain than the regular curriculum can allow. To that end, Level III activities often look beyond the school to provide access to additional resources and experts. In order to assist the teachers to think about opportunities for Level III programming, I asked them to use brainstorming, a thinking tool with which they are familiar, to think of activities that would be appropriate for three of our students, Thiago, Bridget, and Michael. All three are enrolled in the fifth grade, and all demonstrate a very high degree of strength, talent, and interest in science.

Thiago is the son of an immigrant family who work at the meatpacking factory located near our school. Although he did not begin to learn English until he came to
EHVE midway through second grade, Thiago obtained the highest reading and math scores in the fourth grade, as measured by the state assessment test that all students must take. Thiago has excelled at all Level I and Level II services in which he has participated. For example, when Thiago’s third-grade teacher began to ask the class open-ended questions that emphasized the higher levels of Bloom’s taxonomy, Thiago was able to synthesize various areas studied and develop insightful and deeply analytical answers. Similarly, when a scientist from the local university offered to assist students before school with a schoolwide science fair, Thiago came to every session and used her assistance to take first in a category where all of the other prize winners were enrolled in grades higher than his own. Although Thiago’s parents are very supportive of his academic efforts, they speak no English and have limited educational backgrounds.

Bridget’s mother is a surgeon and her father is an attorney. Bridget is a highly motivated student and always performs at or near the top of her class. An early reader, Bridget is interested in many academic areas, but has a special affinity for science. Bridget’s parents have supported her interests by taking her to museums and enrolling her in summer enrichment programs, but desire more challenges for her during the school day. Bridget has also done extremely well on all Level I and Level II offerings that have emphasized math and science, such as when her fourth-grade teacher used Creative Problem Solving (CPS) to help the class organize needed materials for a science experiment that investigated ways to increase recycling at EHVE. Bridget was able to lead her classmates in developing a project that effectively reduced the school’s rubbish output by 50%.

Michael is being raised by a single mother, who left high school without graduating and now works long hours as a waitress to support herself, Michael, and his younger sister. Michael has long been seen as a behavior problem at EHVE. He nearly failed second grade, and has a long string of low and unsatisfactory grade reports. When EHVE began providing Level I and Level II activities, however, Michael’s teachers noticed immediately that he was very engaged in the process, often performing better than other students who had traditionally outpaced him in class. When working with a teacher in a small group where students were asked to identify rocks from certain geographical areas around the state, for example, Michael demonstrated an uncanny ability to use the correct terminology and processes to identify each example, even though he had done poorly on the paper-and-pencil exam that tested this knowledge. Although Michael had always performed extremely well on standardized tests that measured student achievement, he now became motivated to do well in class, and his grades have improved markedly. Michael has demonstrated particular aptitude in scientific tasks, and constantly asks for more work in this area.

When I first asked the teachers to come up with some ideas to use as Level III activities, they seemed overwhelmed. I heard responses such as, “I’m not very good at science so I don’t see how we can help them,” and “I worry more about the kids who are struggling—I don’t see how we can spend time on these kids.” I reminded the teachers that we were trying to match all learners’ needs with appropriate instruction, and asked them to try brainstorming to come up with some ideas that might assist in supporting Thiago, Bridget, and Michael. Although a little hesitant, they agreed to try it out.
To begin the brainstorming activity, I reviewed the four guidelines for generating ideas with the teachers who gathered after school to assist with this process. They are:

- **Don’t judge.** When working to generate lots of possibilities, no one should criticize or praise another person’s contributions.
- **Lots of options/seek quantity.** During this process we try to think of as many options as possible. The more options, the better.
- **Freewheeling.** Possibilities that might seem far out, funny, or even silly are perfectly acceptable during brainstorming as they may suggest an option to someone.
- **Look for combinations.** See if there are ideas that can be combined with others, or “piggybacked,” to create a new idea that builds upon another already out there.

As the teachers began this process, they worked slowly at first, several taking a moment to jot notes down on pieces of scratch paper. After a few minutes, however, the teachers became much more enthusiastic about the process. They began to generate ideas, which they wrote on large pieces of chart paper so that they were able to review them as they proceeded. After about ten minutes, we had more than 20 ideas regarding programming possibilities for Thiago, Bridget, and Michael. Some of the ideas included:

- Involving the students in regional, statewide, and national science competitions, especially those where their performance would be rated by scientists;
- Allowing Thiago, Bridget, and Michael to accelerate their science studies so that they might take classes at the nearby middle or high schools;
- Enrolling in Saturday and summer enrichment programs sponsored by the local university;
- Assessing problem solving styles of the EHVE faculty to better allow future collaboration when investigating possible solutions for students;
- Sending home questionnaires
- Arranging for field trips for the students of local manufacturing and industrial plants so that Thiago, Bridget, and Michael could see practical aspects of science;
- Encouraging more cross curricular planning by EHVE teachers so that science specialists from the district could assist in integrating science instruction into all subject areas;
- Using curriculum compacting so that Thiago, Bridget, and Michael would have more opportunities to engage in advanced science curriculum;
- Offering seminars at the school for the students that are team taught with scientists from the local university and the meatpacking plant;
- Contacting the natural history museum at the local university that is conducting a research project on prairie restoration;
- Sponsoring more competitive programs such as Science Olympiad, Future Problem Solving, and Destination ImagiNation;
- Bringing high school and college students who excel in science to EHVE so that they could work with Thiago, Bridget, and Michael on independent projects;
• Working with local artists to assist the students to see how many of their scientific ideas could be represented visually;
• Exploring online science options, such as those offered by major universities and that allow students to earn credits.

After debriefing, the teachers decided that their most promising ideas included assessing how they and others in the faculty responded to change and approach problems, such as how to implement the LoS approach. To work with this I arranged for all members of the staff to take VIEW: An Assessment of Problem Solving Styles, so that each teacher could get a better grasp of his or her individual strengths as well as those of their colleagues (www.creativelearning.com/problem-solving-styles.html). The second idea that we decided to pursue included contacting the natural history museum at the local university. By doing so, we were able to enroll Thiago, Bridget, and Michael in a research project that examined the progress of a prairie restoration project. Each of the students was able to participate one afternoon a week on recording and analyzing data related to the project, and several teachers were invited to participate in professional development opportunities related to the findings. In this way, we were also able to enrich our already scheduled Level II activities.

**Level III Activity: Paired Comparison Analysis (PCA) Focusing Tool**

In order to implement Level III, we set as one of our goals to design opportunities that link explicitly with students’ needs and to communicate expectations clearly. Sally Townsend, who had all three students in third grade, summarized their strengths as follows, “Thiago can think conceptually about material to which he may have only just been introduced. Bridget is able to explore a variety of possibilities, and exhibits great leadership skills when working in a group. And Michael . . . Michael just gets it. He is able to apply what we study in science to real situations.” Although all EHVE teachers are highly qualified and licensed in the appropriate field, I realize that some are more comfortable with differentiated instruction than others. Specifically, I hoped that our teachers would make Level III opportunities more available to our students. Our brainstorming activity indicated to me that our teachers were excellent at thinking of opportunities for students. For the upcoming school year, the following practices and opportunities seem relevant to our goals:

• Differentiated instruction within the classroom so that all students receive an appropriate level of challenge;
• Determining problem solving styles for teachers (through VIEW: An Assessment of Problem Solving Style; www.creativelearning.com/problem-solving-styles.html), and learning styles for students (using the Dunn and Dunn inventory; www.learningstyles.net) via sessions led by outside consultants held at EHVE;
• Developing a database regarding individuals with specialized expertise who can assist teachers to develop learning experiences for students with special talents and interests in specific disciplines, such as science, economics, history, political science, and the like;
Increasing the number of opportunities for students to participate in competitions with students from other schools, such as the Science Olympiad, Future Problem Solving, or Destination ImagiNation; and

Implementing programs such as Creative Problem Solving (CPS) and the Junior Great Books (JGB) schoolwide at EHVE so that more students will have an opportunity to engage in open-ended discussions.

Even though teachers design their own Level I and Level II programming, I suggested that increased coordination of Level III planning might improve their capacity to design opportunities that link explicitly with student needs and talents. To assist with identifying and prioritizing our programming needs, I suggested to our teachers that we use and practice the Paired Comparison Analysis (PCA) focusing tool to assist us in this task. (For more information about tools for generating and focusing options, see Treffinger & Nassab, 2011a, b.)

PCA asks participants to analyze a small number of options carefully, so as to use priorities of the group to help make decisions that will help support school goals. At first, the teachers and I had a difficult time discussing priorities related to professional development because, in the words of several teachers, “I want to make them all the highest priority!” Once the teachers began using the PCA focusing tool, however, a consensus of opinions began to take place. The teachers determined that the following should be our priorities with regard to Level III programming for the upcoming year:

1. Differentiated instruction within the classroom;
2. Development of a database of individuals with specialized expertise;
3. Introducing CPS and JGB in all classrooms;
4. Determining problem solving styles; and
5. Increased opportunities for competitions.

The Rest of the Story

Based on the experience and readiness levels of the faculty, they and I agreed that all teachers would work collaboratively to assure the first two priorities, but that they would be able to choose two of the remaining three areas that they felt best met children’s individual needs. A teacher who had a student like Thiago, for example, might focus on implementing a JGB program and provide him with increased opportunities to engage in competitions such as the Science Olympiad. A teacher working with Bridget might similarly differentiate her classroom assignments so that they are more similar in nature to real-life scientific investigations and finding opportunities for her to work with a scientist who investigates consumer preferences at the meatpacking plant. Michael might benefit from being introduced to CPS and having his learning style preferences identified.

Time to Reflect and Respond

Think about yourself as Gerald Swanson. In this role:
• How will you recognize and handle other students who need and would benefit from Level III activities?
• What sort of other opportunities might you envision being appropriate for Thiago, Bridget, and Michael?
• How will you determine if the Level III activities pursued are appropriate and sufficient?
• How might you communicate with parents about the Level III activities being offered to some students?

Did your reflection on the case study and responses to the questions above lead you to consider any of the following elements of the LoS approach to talent development?

• Programming for Some Students (Only selected students participate in an activity based on documented needs);
• Differentiated services (those that respond to the student’s unique personal strengths and talents through individual or group experiences);
• Self-assessment and reflection (teachers and students tabulate, organize, and analyze results of interest inventory);
• Learn and use critical thinking tools (learn, practice, and apply brainstorming and PCA focusing tools for selecting and evaluating targeted experiences).

Resources Referred to in Case Study


Learning More About the LoS Approach

To learn more about the LoS approach, visit the Center for Creative Learning website (http://www.creativelearning.com). We offer PDF files that provide an overview of the model, a “Frequently Asked Questions” document, case studies of each level, and a variety of other electronic and print resources. The Center also offers workshops and consultation on new program development, restructuring existing programs, and program evaluation.

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