So You're (Thinking of) Starting Enrichment Clusters
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Since 2001 I have helped start Enrichment Cluster programs in hundreds of schools, mostly in and around New York City. For many schools Enrichment Clusters—one component of the Schoolwide Enrichment Model (SEM)—are the first step in implementing the model. While Enrichment Clusters can be an ideal way to begin, they require careful preparation and support and, lacking that preparation, suffer some common pitfalls. I'd like to briefly discuss the preparation needed and identify ways in which some schools have avoided the pitfalls. I hope this discussion will be helpful whether you've already begun an Enrichment Cluster program or are considering it.

Enrichment Clusters put the "Schoolwide" in the Schoolwide Enrichment Model

First, a little background. Enrichment Clusters have been a part of SEM since the early 1990's and have undergone the same kind of developmental process, evaluation, and research as all components in the model. Enrichment Clusters truly put the "schoolwide" in the Schoolwide Enrichment Model; they are for everyone, including students not typically served by gifted services and with few chances to participate in the collaborative, choice-based projects that those identified as "gifted and talented" often have. Usually scheduled for one or two periods a week and conducted in cycles throughout the year, Enrichment Clusters allow students *and* teachers to work in areas of interest with others who share the same interest. Enrichment Clusters grow from the same philosophy and follow the same pedagogy as the rest of the SEM components, supporting not only advanced students wanting acceleration, but also struggling students who would be better served by engaging, strength-based opportunities (rather than continuous remediation), and proficient students who, with increased motivation can challenge themselves to reach their potential.

It is easy to understand why many schools see Enrichment Clusters as a good starting point to expand enrichment learning and teaching. Enrichment Clusters can inject a dose of enjoyment into a school day that has been increasingly overloaded with content requirements and standards; burdened by testing pressure that impedes teachers' autonomy and creativity; and hampered by the marginalization or elimination of arts, physical education, and popular electives. Further, Enrichment Clusters can provide opportunities for authentic inquiry and problem solving, collaborative learning, and meaningful communication and projects—values at the heart of many schools' mission statements.

Joe Renzulli often talks about the need for new programs to show "visible effects"; the Enrichment Cluster program is both visible and popular with most students, parents, and faculty members. Though some may think that time spent in interest-based activities is not the "real" work of school, the visible student projects, increased enthusiasm, and improved attendance on Cluster days, usually overcome most objections.

In addition, well-constructed interest-based Enrichment Clusters integrate general, gifted, special, and bilingual education students, building community and breaking down the hardened perceptions and labels so prevalent in school. For teachers, research shows that the process of creating and leading Clusters—as facilitator, collaborator, guide-on-the-side—can have a

positive impact on their regular classroom practice (Reis, Gentry, & Maxfield, 1998). In Clusters, teachers can see students in a new light and gain insights into their strengths and learning styles. In this way Clusters can be the training ground for more responsive, student-centered, differentiated, inquiry-based teaching.

Not all schools decide to start with Enrichment Clusters. One strength of SEM is that it is not a prescription or set program; each school can find its own starting points and no two SEM programs are alike. This also requires a different kind of effort than a prescriptive program. Every SEM school must think carefully about the first step in light of both immediate needs and long-term goals.

Enrichment Clusters: Some Challenges and Common Pitfalls
1. Separating Enrichment Learning and Teaching from the "real work" of School

While blocking out time for Enrichment Clusters communicates a commitment to enrichment, it can also reinforce a perception that Enrichment Learning and Teaching is separate and distinct from academics. The Cluster period fits into teachers' and students' established models for clubs and non-academic electives that may not have featured inquiry-based, research, and action-oriented projects and services. Changing these mental models requires effective training, consistent reinforcement, and ongoing evaluation. Teachers need to see and build a clear relationship of Enrichment Learning and Teaching to standards-supported skills that should develop in the academic classroom as well. Establishing time periods in which to debrief and evaluate Clusters and discuss realizations about students is an essential and often overlooked practice. Program administrators must actively encourage teachers to use aspects of the pedagogy in their classrooms so that levels of student engagement, choice, problem solving, and differentiation will increase across the curriculum.

All Cluster topics can and should connect to specific academic skills and worthwhile projects, but teachers and administrators must sometimes look beyond the obvious to make that happen. Some topics—newspapers or literary magazines, science and technology projects, social activism, debate or student government projects, school or community beautification, for example—easily fit people's concepts of curricular-related, authentic, project-based clusters. Others—such as sports and crafts—while highly popular and worthwhile, can be limited by teachers' and students' perceptions of them as only a chance to play or to make predetermined objects, rather than as rich opportunities for inquiry and exploration. Creative facilitation connects these topics to other related fields—journalism, art, business, history, health, technology, communications, etc.—while deepening physical experiences, helping students find issues to investigate, problems they care about, worthwhile products and services to produce, and target audiences beyond themselves. Examples of such creative extensions are offered in a variety of books and articles on Enrichment Clusters including Renzulli's article *Things You Can Do To "Academicize" The Content of Your Enrichment Clusters: A Case Study* (Renzulli, 2010).

Some schools use one or more Enrichment Cluster cycles to link directly to curricular projects, developing interdisciplinary collaborations around a central theme or topic. These "Curriculum-based Enrichment Clusters" and the professional development experiences that support them are well described in books by Nora Friedman—*The Art of Schoolwide Enrichment* and *Opening Doors: The Administrators Guide to the Schoolwide Enrichment Model* (Friedman, 2007, 2005) and Margaret Beecher—*Developing the Gifts and Talents of All Students in the Regular Classroom* (Beecher, 1995). For teachers to negotiate and feel successful in the tricky balance between student-centered, interest-based approaches and curriculum standards and

requirements for which they are held accountable, program administrators must invest time and energy in teachers' professional preparation and reflective practice.

2. Too Few Facilitators and Spaces—Too Many Students

Enrichment Clusters require enough adults and spaces to allow for small classes. It is difficult, if not impossible, to conduct student-directed, inquiry- and project-based clusters with 25 or 30 students in a class. The nature of the process requires smaller groups, usually between 5 to 15 students depending on the topic. (*Note:* Some specific topics can function with more students and some large groups with multiple facilitators can subdivide.) If this target class size is not possible, goals and expectations must be changed or scaled back accordingly. It takes time to recruit and schedule enough facilitators to do this work.

Most schools start the program in stages (a few grades at time). However, as the program grows, scheduling can actually get easier with more people and spaces available. More Cluster choices also improve the potential to reach most students' interests. Organizational preparation is also essential to the early success of the program. Careful planning to move students to and from their Clusters, insure adequate coverage for absent facilitators, and organize large spaces such as libraries or lunchrooms to accommodate multiple Clusters avoids potential chaos that can undermine the positive feelings SEM schools hope to engender.

3. Inadequate Professional Development

The idea of Enrichment Clusters may appear relatively easy—set aside time for teachers to teach something they love to interested students. But to fulfill the potential of Enrichment Clusters, well designed, consistent professional development experiences are needed. Limited time and many competing needs can lead to shortchanging training, reflection, and evaluation for Clusters.

At the start, an introduction to the SEM philosophy and pedagogy helps teachers understand the purpose and context and begin to shift some of the established perceptions about Enrichment Learning and Teaching discussed above. This is a different type of professional development process than for most other new initiatives. It asks teachers to create their own syllabus—to be creative, flexible, and responsive, and to proceed without predetermined content objectives and pre-planned units. The familiar lesson plan format is discouraged. Instead, teachers are asked to develop a menu of possibilities with a range of potential outcomes and options for students. This process can be scary for many people, and professional developers must be able to support teachers' efforts to embark on unfamiliar journeys alongside their students.

This kind of PD requires a creative, collaborative setting that makes time for brainstorming and sharing of ideas and resources. In multiple sessions, teachers collectively craft the list of offerings, design the Cluster plans, and prepare exciting and appealing descriptions and titles to inspire student interest. With careful and dynamic planning, the process is fun and motivating for teachers. Without such planning many Clusters remain underdeveloped and tend to feature relatively low-level, full-group activities directed by the facilitator.

As important as the preparation, are ongoing, regular check-ins. These keep the process on track and help facilitators problem solve, share successes and challenges, and focus on big ideas and goals. Teachers need opportunities to reflect and share in a collaborative process so that Enrichment Clusters can improve. At the end of each cycle teachers evaluate and plan for the next cycle.

Another challenge is that the training for Enrichment Clusters—even those being introduced in a limited way or with just a few grade levels—involves everyone. A school needs

cluster teachers, paraprofessionals, other staff members, to participate in and support the program. That level of involvement makes scheduling more difficult both for the Clusters themselves and for the PD.

4. Lack of Program Coordination and Support

Successful Enrichment Cluster programs invariably have an Enrichment Team or Coordinator to support the facilitators. That team—often made up of teachers, administrators, and parents—should include people good at making connections and thinking creatively. Without such a team, program details and teacher support will fall entirely on a principal or other overburdened administrator and the Cluster program will suffer.

Two of the most important aspects of successful Enrichment Clusters are also two of the hardest things for the facilitators to organize and arrange on their own: 1) connecting with experts in the field (what we call Type I Enrichment) and 2) organizing the final projects and services (Type III Enrichment). Exposing students directly to the methods and approaches of experts and professionals in the field through visits, field trips, teleconference, or other means, elevates the entire process, establishes the real world context, offers students ideas for projects and investigations, and can move the Clusters in unexpected and exciting directions. Even if a facilitator personally knows an expert or has conceived of an exciting visit, coordinating events is a daunting task. The Enrichment Team or Coordinator is charged with collecting resources, making calls, pursuing requests, scheduling and confirming, keeping track of contact information, etc. The *ASPIRE* Survey (https://theaspiresurvey.com), a neatly organized on-line tool, can guide Enrichment teams through the process of collecting and maintaining Enrichment resources. Many schools have also developed their own processes for identifying and keeping track of guests and resources in and outside of school.

Facilitators also need support in organizing final projects and services. Authentic Type III's are, by nature, shared in different ways (i.e. community service projects, teaching others, publishing, performing, or sharing technology, etc.) with different in- and out-of-school audiences. Organizing an event, visiting a community center, producing a show, creating a website, or publishing a book can all be complex and challenging projects. Yet, these are the most powerful payoffs—the "visible effects" and rigorous, memorable experiences that truly achieve the potential of Enrichment Clusters. Again, a group of people or a person with a dedicated role expands the possibilities and encourages teachers to dream rather than feel burdened by the additional work.

Getting Started

Enrichment Clusters, done well, fully embody SEM philosophy: engaging, enjoyable, rigorous learning, celebrating the potential gifts and talents of the entire school community. Done haphazardly they will still be popular with students and some staff members, but they will keep enrichment teaching segregated from the rest of school and can actually reinforce preconceptions about the value of Enrichment Learning and Teaching. That said, facilitators and administrators should bear in mind that *there is no such thing as a perfect Enrichment Cluster or Cluster program.* Failure to fully and immediately realize all of the goals should not deter a school from taking the first steps.

Successful Enrichment Clusters require an ongoing commitment to plan, evaluate, and improve the process. Gathering and scheduling enthusiastic facilitators, matching student and teacher interests and expertise, building a line-up of expert resources, planning worthwhile sharing opportunities—all are part of a continually unfolding process. As I often say—"Clusters are always either getting better or getting worse. They never stay the same."

Teachers tend to be perfectionists by nature. They want to do it "right". Enrichment Clusters ask facilitators to back off a bit and let things unfold. That unfolding creative process looks different in different Clusters. Facilitators must be creative, not so much to plan out every move in advance, but to be flexible and responsive to issues, topics, and possibilities that stir the students' interests, regardless of whether they meet the facilitator's expectations.

While every Cluster should have a product or service the emphasis must stay firmly on the process. By providing time for facilitators to reflect on and celebrate those "aha" moments—the unexpected discovery, the previously unnoticed student, the teamwork and shifting leadership in the classroom, the productive skills being developed—we take the emphasis off of the "perfect" final product and onto the unfolding process of Enrichment Learning and Teaching.

Where Enrichment Clusters have become an ongoing and treasured feature of the school, this philosophy and pedagogy have found their way into many aspects of teaching and the overall school program. Clubs, electives, activity periods, after-school recreation programs are all important, enriching experiences for students. Enrichment Clusters have a different purpose—to develop, practice, and extend students' abilities as first hand inquirers, problem solvers, collaborators, communicators, action-takers—in areas of their interest and passion.

References

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