

Differentiation Strategies for Gifted and Talented Learners

Differentiation within the classroom provides students with the best environment for having their academic needs met. Differentiation is the least intrusive intervention for gifted students, who - like all students - should be seen to be "only as special as necessary."

CONTENT

- Provide more challenging reading materials
- Focus on the overall trends, patterns and themes rather than small details and facts
- Study problems that do not have a clear solution
- Use topics of interest to the student, relevant to how the world works, complex and worthwhile

PROCESS

- Allow for flexible groupings of students: individual, pairs, small groups
- Create specialized learning centres for skill work
- Encourage creativity and reward risk-taking
- Provide opportunities for divergent (many answers) and convergent (best answer) thinking
- Explicitly teach skills needed to learn independently (research, organization, etc.)

PRODUCT

- Allow a variety of acceptable products (using Multiple Intelligences, for example)
- Offer leveled projects (For an A..., For a B..., etc.)
- Involve the student in creating the scoring guide
- Assign tasks that are authentic and for a real audience
- Match the product to the outcomes being met

LEARNING ENVIRONMENT

- Physical space: Can the student move freely within the room? The school? Who has control over materials?
- Conditions: Are humor and creativity appreciated? Is the atmosphere welcoming? Is discovery encouraged?
- Teacher: Is the teacher committed to differentiation? Curious and enthusiastic? Willing to relinquish control of the learning?
- Groupings: Do gifted students have opportunities to work with others like them - even across grades?

Appropriate Adaptations for Gifted and Talented Learners

The following adaptations are suitable for gifted students.

Presentation Strategies:

- Vary the method of presentation: lecture, small groups, large group, demonstration, individual experimentation
- Avoid having student copy notes when material is already mastered

Curriculum Strategies:

- Provide opportunities for open-ended, self-directed activities
- Provide instruction in research skills needed to conduct an independent study in student's interest area
- Provide independent learning opportunities
- Use advanced supplementary/reading materials
- Encourage the use of creativity Ask higher level questions
- Provide opportunities to develop depth and breadth of knowledge in a subject area

Organizational/Behavioral Strategies:

- Use a Study Contract for student to achieve outcomes
- Use a Learning Log for independent or outside learning
- Establish a timeline for long-range projects

Motivational Strategies:

- Provide fewer drill and practice activities when material is learned
- Give student choices of activities in learning the content
- Allow the student to 'buy' time for self-directed activities after material is learned

Assessment Strategies:

- Give a pretest to allow the student to demonstrate mastery
- Provide self-checking materials
- Provide tests at a higher level of thinking

Environmental Strategies:

- Arrange for a mentor to work with the student in interest area
- Cluster group gifted/talented students by areas of strength in the classroom
- Allow independent use of library

Enrichment Strategies

ENRICHMENT means that the student is working on a topic in more DEPTH or BREADTH than others. The student keeps pace with the rest of his/her classmates but has more time to explore topics of interest. Enrichment strategies include:

Independent study

In an independent study, the student selects a topic of interest in any academic area where he shows strength. The student and teacher work out parameters for process (how much time each day, where research will take place, what materials will be needed, what other persons will be involved, etc) and product (how will the student demonstrate what was learned, will the product be shared, will it serve a real—life purpose, etc.) The independent study suits students who have task commitment and who tend to finish regular work quickly and correctly.

Study contract

A teacher may use a study contract to keep a student working alongside her peers most of the time while allowing her to make choices about what or how to learn. The study contract is used when the student has already met some but not all outcomes for a particular unit. A menu of mutually-acceptable choices should accompany the study contract to ensure the student is using her earned time wisely.

Mentorship

A student with heightened knowledge in a specific academic area may benefit from contact with a specialist in this field. This is particularly the case in lower grades when the teacher cannot keep up with the student's capacity to learn the subject. A mentor may be a teacher of a higher grade, a community member, an older student or an instructor at a local community college or university. Mentorships vary in frequency of visits and may even take place online. Care must be taken to ensure that the student and the mentor are compatible and that the arrangement is agreeable to both parties.

Complete a learning log

Some gifted students already have outside hobbies and experiences arranged through their parents or communities. This learning can be compatible with the classroom curriculum. The teacher may allow the student to complete a learning log of her experiences to show what she has learned and how it connects to classroom outcomes. This may free up time for the student to pursue other interests during the school day or provide evidence of learning for her to move on to the next unit or level in a particular subject. A learning log is also a good assessment tool for a mentorship.

Create an interest centre

Students with intense interest areas may be willing to share their knowledge with their peers through an interest centre in the classroom or school. The student can use earned time during the school day or create the centre as a result of independent study. Others would be invited to use materials collected and/or created by the student to learn about a special topic which can be embedded in or tangential to the curriculum.

Tiered assignments

Tiered assignments work well in skill areas where the student has not yet met the outcomes but can do so easily and requires additional challenge. For example, in math class the student may be performing similar operations as his peers but using more challenging numbers or complete more steps. In language arts, the student may read more challenging texts, write in a more sophisticated genre, or use more complex words in word study.

Specialized grading criteria

Some students are ready for a greater challenge even when completing similar assignments. For example, when assigning a piece of writing, a teacher may only be looking for ideas, organization and correctness from the class, but a gifted student may also be assessed on voice or word choice. Likewise, the parameters of the assignment may be changed to suit the student's strengths. A science experiment may become a video or PowerPoint presentation; a social studies essay may require three sources from the class and more than five from the gifted student.

Extension activities

Many textbooks and teachers' guides provide follow-up or extension activities as time allows. When gifted students finish early, these may be suitable ways for them to get the challenge and depth of understanding they require. Open-ended, real-world problems are excellent ways to extend students' learning.

Enrichment clusters

If there is a small group of students in the school with similar interests and aptitudes, they may be brought together for a set period of time each week to pursue a topic of study under the guidance of a teacher or mentor. The topic may change frequently or develop into a long-term exploration, but it should be open-ended and have real-world application. Enrichment clusters may be worked into the schedule of a committed teacher as contact time.

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