

Differentiating Curriculum and Instruction for Gifted and Talented Students

Most gifted children in the United States spend the majority of their school time in regular classroom settings, grouped with age peers who have a wide range of academic achievement and potential. This expansive range of needs in every classroom underscores the importance of assessing all students appropriately and providing differentiated curriculum and instruction that will promote their learning. Differentiation includes (a) the design and/or selection of curriculum, (b) the selection and use of instructional practices, including grouping strategies, varied resources, and variations to the pacing of instruction, and (c) the assessment of learning, all of which rely on assessment evidence demonstrating learner differences. Yet, evidence suggests that minimal differentiation of curriculum, instruction, and practice is provided to gifted students in the regular classroom. Thus, they often spend significant amounts of school time reviewing and practicing concepts they have already learned, limiting their academic progress and talent development.

Differentiation is grounded in an understanding that curriculum and instruction promote learning and growth when they are linked to the specific, assessed needs and capabilities of the learners involved. Gifted and talented students learn more quickly than and differently from other children of the same age. They generally need less practice to master particular skills and are capable of intellectual engagement requiring greater complexity in the consideration of ideas and in completion of tasks. These learning characteristics suggest the need for curriculum, instruction, and assessment that are differentiated in level, complexity, depth, and pacing to ensure that gifted children have the opportunity to make continuous learning progress in school (Rogers, 2007). Effective differentiation for gifted students consists of carefully planned, coordinated learning experiences that extend the core curriculum, combine the curricular strategies of enrichment and acceleration, and integrate instructional strategies that engage learners at appropriate levels of challenge. Such curriculum and instruction are typically coupled with flexible grouping strategies to promote effective classroom management.

The National Association for Gifted Children maintains that at a minimum, schools must ensure that gifted children are provided with appropriately differentiated curriculum and instruction to support continuous growth in the regular classroom setting. However, differentiation must be viewed as an approach that is necessary but not sufficient to comprehensive service delivery for gifted learners (Hertberg-Davis, 2009). Differentiation within heterogeneous classrooms should not replace more intensive services for gifted learners that may be provided through resource support, full-class grouping models, or other approaches. Even classes specifically tailored for identified gifted learners require differentiation as a fundamental component of curriculum, instruction, and assessment because of the learning differences within the gifted population.

Teachers are faced with the responsibility of responding to the wide range of learners in their classrooms, often without sufficient training, resources, or support. Most regular education teachers have had no specific training in appropriately adjusting curriculum or instruction in response to the ability and achievement levels of gifted learners. This lack of preparation perpetuates misconceptions such as that gifted learners “will be fine on their own” and that an appropriate approach to differentiation is to have gifted learners help their peers instead of having opportunities to grow in their own learning. Too often, limited funding for gifted education and for resources in general precludes teacher access to curricular resources that are tailored to the

needs of advanced learners or training in their use. Teachers also need access to resource specialists with expertise in differentiating for exceptional learners. Such specialists can work with classroom teachers to prepare and deliver appropriately differentiated lessons, as well as to create and interpret assessments that can guide instructional decision-making.

In summary, to provide gifted students – and all learners – opportunities for continuous learning and growth in their classrooms, our schools must provide support for and emphasis on appropriate differentiation of curriculum and instruction. For gifted learners, appropriate differentiation allows for increasing levels of advanced, abstract, and complex curriculum that is substantive and responds to learner differences. The National Association for Gifted Children strongly recommends that every school provide:

- access to curricular resources that are designed for gifted learners;
- systematic and substantial professional development for all teachers regarding the needs of gifted learners, differentiation in general, and flexible grouping approaches; and
- resource specialists who can support the classroom teacher in assessing gifted learner differences, making adjustments to the curriculum, and implementing differentiated instruction.

Together these critical components will strengthen a school's response to gifted students and encourage the growth of all learners.

Resources

Hertberg-Davis, H. (2009). Myth 7: Differentiation in the regular classroom is equivalent to gifted programs and is sufficient: Classroom teachers have the time, the skill, and the will to differentiate adequately. *Gifted Child Quarterly*, 53, 251-253.

Rogers, K. B. (2007). Lessons learned about educating the gifted and talented: A synthesis of the research on educational practice. *Gifted Child Quarterly*, 51, 382-396.

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The National Association for Gifted Children (NAGC) is an organization of parents, teachers, educators, other professionals, and community leaders who unite to address the unique needs of children and youth with demonstrated gifts and talents as well as those children who may be able to develop their talent potential with appropriate educational experiences.

All position papers are approved by the NAGC Board of Directors and remain consistent with the organization's position that education in a democracy must respect the uniqueness of all individuals, the broad range of cultural diversity present in our society, and the similarities and differences in learning characteristics that can be found within any group of students. NAGC Position Papers can be found at www.nagc.org.